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## Post- '98: The Normal Gay

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POST- '98: THE NORMAL GAY

By

Christian Rush

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
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## POST- '98: THE NORMAL GAY

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University of Nebraska, 2019

Advisor: Marco Abel

James Collard's post-gay is a secret within the gay community, yet the ramifications of what he claimed our community was heading toward in 1998 are spreading across our community without us realizing it. This thesis tasks itself with unpacking what it meant for Collard to call our community "post-gay," and how that term came to be throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century within the gay community. The thesis explores major gay texts found in literature, film, and on digital spaces in the ways they have shaped the post-gay identity that we, as gay people, have found ourselves living in. Ultimately Collard's post-gay has created a major rift within the community as to who is allowed to be public, and who is not—causing major tension and dissonance among a group of people who continue to remain at the fringes of society.

## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to the little gay boy who thought his story was not wanted. Who felt like he would never belong. Who inspired me to write this. Who gives me courage every day.

## Acknowledgments

I offer my most sincere thanks to my advisor, Professor Marco Abel, for your willingness to take me on. This project would not be nearly what it is without your constant guidance, attention to detail, pressuring me to think beyond what I already knew, and words of encouragement in every draft.

Thank you to my committee members, Stacey Waite and Guy Reynolds, for your time and consideration for me as both an undergraduate and graduate student in this department.

Love and thanks to my family who I think is tired of me ranting about sexuality and identity at this point.

To my fellow cohort members, this has been a wild ride, and I am immensely proud of each of us.

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### After the Post-Gay

Approaching the new millennium, James Collard, *Out Magazine* editor in chief, poignantly argued in a *Newsweek* cover story that the gay community was no longer the community of the previous thirty years; instead, he claimed that we, as a community, were now living in a “post-gay” America.<sup>1</sup> By stating that we are now living in an age of the post-gay, Collard signaled that the community had moved beyond itself. He believed that for the last three decades the conversation circulating both within and outside of the community was solely focused on issues surrounding AIDS, and that now that the crisis was “over” the focus of the community needed to push for normalization. This normalization that Collard called for was his attempt at saying that in order for gay people to be recognized and achieve basic human rights we needed to appear as normal and valid to the rest of America. Collard argued that in order to achieve this normalization gay men would have to move out of the “gay ghettos”—West Hollywood, Chelsea, San Francisco, Boystown, etc.—in an attempt to place gay men within more traditionally American spaces, such as suburbs of major cities. Moving from these gay districts to more suburban, “American” neighborhoods would force gay men to assimilate to American moral traditions that celebrate a household with a dual income, a white picket fence, a family pet, and a child or two—making gay men look no different than their neighbors. Collard furthered his argument for normalization by homing in on how the gay community has been too focused on the aesthetic appeal of the body. He explains that in order to be gay one must achieve an idealized notion of the self—the self being

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<sup>1</sup> James Collard, “Leaving the Gay Ghetto,” in *Newsweek* 132, no. 7 (August 17, 1998) 53.

directly tied to the body. For gay men the body is the forefront of your presented identity because it speaks for itself before the individual is able to open their mouth. Collard believed that the aestheticized body of gay men was too gay and that in order to be seen as normal people gay men had to stop performing their sexuality so visibly; instead, he believed gay men should locate themselves within hegemonic structures of what is and is not acceptable for the male body. Collard concluded his article by explaining that the post in “post-gay” also signals that somehow the anger and rage that grew out of the AIDS crisis was no longer necessary, no longer a force that can be used to unite our community. Collard suggested that liberation from the closet would create a sense of openness that allows for a semblance of freedom that had been missing from the community for decades. While he acknowledged that the struggle was still real for some, he held, by now two decades ago, that those who were not experiencing the struggle should not be made to feel bad for their privileged place.

Twenty years later, and two questions come to mind: were we ever in the age of the post-gay, and if so, where are we now? In many ways much of what Collard articulated came to fruition. If we look at Collard’s first suggestion of leaving the “gay ghetto” it can be seen that the loss of gay spaces has been happening in America for years. The death of the gayborhood—a colloquial phrase meaning historically gay neighborhoods, burrows, and suburbs and what Collard deemed the “gay ghetto”—has been extensively documented since *The New York Times* first published an article about the death of San Francisco’s Castro Street.<sup>2</sup> What Patricia Leigh Brown explains is that the Castro has been on the steady decline since the late 1990s and that the Castro is not

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<sup>2</sup> Patricia Leigh Brown, “Gay Enclaves Face Prospect of Being Passé,” *The New York Times* (October 30, 2007): <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/30/us/30gay.html>.



the only gayborhood dying. Gentrification of traditionally queer neighborhoods within major metropolitan cities has forced many individuals to move away and resettle in financially safe places. With many queer people leaving districts such as the Castro, these neighborhoods are facing a decimation of a particular kind of queer history, as they become tourist destinations with high priced high-rises.

Within the space of queer histories, the landmark decision of *Obergefell v. Hodges* by the Supreme Court of the United States on June 26, 2015 legalized same-sex marriage across the country. In writing the majority opinion, Justice Kennedy states, “Their [members of the LGBTQ community] hope is not to be condemned to live in loneliness, excluded from one of civilization’s oldest institutions.”<sup>3</sup> With the court’s ruling in favor of marriage equality a milestone was reached for the gay rights movement—the right to marry allows gay people to appear no different from their hetero counterparts. I do not mean to sound mean-spirited about this, because marriage equality was a huge step for the movement. For many Americans this landmark decision allowed for their relationships to be recognized by the country, thus allowing for joint healthcare, tax breaks, and a symbolic representation of their love. However, marriage equality fits well within Collard’s determination of the post-gay. With marriage equality achieved, gays could now fully realize their normalized, traditionally American, white-picket fenced suburban dream—having left the “gay ghetto,” they could now look like their heterosexual neighbors in the suburbs.

On June 12, 2016, America experienced the deadliest mass shooting up to that point in Orlando, Florida at the gay nightclub Pulse, leaving fifty people dead, including

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<sup>3</sup> *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 576 U.S. \_\_ (2015).

the gunman. The bodies of queer folk of color scattered the ground within the nightclub. In the days following the massacre, a national response of “love not hate” was disseminated from coast to coast as a way of creating solidarity within the community as a way to fight back against the hatred to which we are subjected on a daily basis. The Pulse massacre brought to light for millions of Americans that hatred towards LGBTQ people, specifically queer people of color, was still present in America. The notion of “love not hate” fits within the phenomenon of the post-gay because now gay people were expected to combat acts of hate with acts of love, abandoning the notion of the angry queer that was often used during the AIDS crisis to discredit the lived experiences of gay people. Movement towards the necessity of love over feelings of hate and anger is a silencing tactic that delegitimizes real emotional responses queer people have. In the so-called (or: alleged) post-gay world, the angry queer became the happy queer, one who could be bolstered on television screens because they were now safe for American children to gaze upon. Be happy because you *are* happy.

The last piece to unpack within Collard’s explanation of the post-gay phenomenon is his discussion of the aestheticized gay male body. To put it simply, to be gay and recognized as normative in America means having to fit within a specific bodily category. I look to the representations of homosexuality on screen as a way to show the acceptable types of gay men—Will from *Will & Grace*, Jack and Ennis from *Brokeback Mountain*, the men of *Queer Eye*, and the cast of HBO’s *Looking*, to name just a few. These men are all similar in the way that they are passably straight upon first glance because they occupy a space of normative masculinity in their presentation of the body. Collard asserted that gay men were aesthetically too gay, or too feminine, and that in

order to be seen as normal they needed to avoid being read as gay. For Hollywood to present gay men as people who could look like your neighbor implies that these men are the acceptable kinds of gay men. When we look at masculinity today it becomes clear how contemporary American culture devalues femininity, so gay men who read as feminine are not going to be accepted as readily as gay men who present as masculine. Only this kind of gay man gets shown to the public, and this reduction of the multiplicity of how gay men look creates a bifurcation within the gay community at large. Men whose looks match the larger culture's normative ideals of gay men, and masculinity in general, have an elevated status within the community, and those that do not are relegated to the fringes.

Reflecting on the twenty years since Collard's assertion that we are living in a post-gay America, I believe his assertion to be accurate; however, this is not a good thing. Acceptance of LGBTQ issues by the straight majority is always the goal, and in many ways in the twenty years since Collard penned his "post-gay" article strides have been made to further the advancement for queer people; however, the level of acceptance that we are seeing is only being achieved through a process of normalization and is only being afforded to certain members of the LGBTQ community. In order to complicate Collard's notion of the post-gay, I think through the work of José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. There could not be a "post" for the gay community because the gay community has never reached a point of completion, in a Muñozian sense of futurity.<sup>4</sup> Being post-gay implies that something has been met by the gay community and that we can move on from our time as gay people. In Muñoz's

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<sup>4</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 11.

words, “queerness is primarily about futurity and hope.”<sup>5</sup> This means that the project of queer identity is never completed: there is always something to be done to better the reality for queer individuals. Queer futurity is a necessity for Muñoz because to him so much of queer theory of the past has focused on the “romances of the negative.”<sup>6</sup>

Muñoz’s notion of the future is idealistic—in order to have hope for a better tomorrow we as a community need to focus on the actions that can take place today in ways that do not focus on the negative history of our past. For Collard to ruminate on the idea of the post-gay implies that the future has already been met—that somehow we have made it as a whole and that we should be grateful for it. But as evidenced by what has happened since Collard coined the term, the gay community has not made it—mass killings, loss of queer spaces, homophobia, conversion therapy, as well as issues of health and the body still run rampant throughout our country.

While I use Muñoz as a way to complicate and move against Collard’s notion of the post-gay, queer futurity also raises some concerns on a very practical level. For example, while there have been moments of hope for certain members of the community, as a whole it is unclear whether there can be a future when there is a bottleneck of problems keeping many individuals from getting through to the other side. I speak of course of the privileging that has been happening within the community for decades. Cisgender, white, middle-to-upper class, thin, able-bodied gay men get to see the future; they also get to live in Collard’s post-gay world. Those gay men are not held within the bottle that is on the verge of bursting; they are what are colloquially referred to as the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

gaytriarchy, occupying a space of homonormativity. This is not to twist Muñoz's words, for it is evident that he believes that the queer future is for everyone, or at least that it should be because "the present is so poisonous and insolvent."<sup>7</sup> Muñoz argues that queerness as such is primarily about the future, is always that force that does not allow the present ever to settle as present, does not allow an ideal to be realized as any moment of such realization: queerness has to remain open to an even better future. The goal of the queer future is to do away with the tyranny of the homonormative, that this notion of living in the here and now is a form of "straight time," a normative time that is placed on us as queer people to assimilate to the normative reality of the present.

I set up both Collard and Muñoz's arguments because they are in direct opposition to each other and thus create a gap that needs to be interpreted and filled somehow. To reiterate, Collard's post-gay reality seeks to have gay men focus exclusively on the present as present and be happy now. Muñoz's queer futurity suggests that queerness is always looking to the future and never settling. As such both occupy temporally disparate realities where they do not meet. So much of where we are as a community today exists within a post-gay framework, but we must be looking toward a future in order to right the wrongs of what has gotten away from us. The gaytriarchy of the community get to profit from their positions with homonormativity—the space of homosexual identity that resembles closely the heterosexual norms of American society—while at the same time they get to pave the way towards the future, leaving those on the margins of the community left without a space to call their own. As such, the

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 30.

members of the gaytriarchy are the only people who get to have both a present and a future.

My goal is to explain how this gap came about, how Collard's post-gay identity came into being, and how we as a community can begin to construct a future for ourselves that does not simply exist for normative gay men. In order to better understand how we arrived in this post- '98, post-gay society of today, it is necessary to locate the pieces of gay male culture that brought us to this point. To do this, I will approach the narrative movement of gay men through analyzing gay life-writing, representative images found in gay cinema, and gay men's use of the internet. Ultimately I aim to show how constructing a normative identity for gay men can create more dissonance and marginalization within a community that really is not normal in the way that Collard wanted us to be. The post-gay is a fantasy, where the idea of equality is there, but such equality comes by normalizing us to a point where we are just straight men who have sex with other men.

## Live (Y)Our Truth: The Gay Master Narrative and the Marketable Identity

Following Oprah Winfrey's Golden Globe speech in January 2018, a national conversation about "truth" stemmed from her claim that we each must live our own personal truths, as opposed to *the* truth.<sup>8</sup> "Live your truth" is a phrase that has grown in popularity in an era where facts are no longer facts and truths may be seen as lies.<sup>9</sup> The phrase is often used as a blanket statement to let individuals feel as if they are existing in an authentic, autonomous space of the self; however, the problematics of living *your* truth stem from what *truth* really is. Marginalized communities attach themselves to narratives of truth production as a way of placing themselves within a normative structure that often disagrees with particular lifestyles. When I think through the narrative of the gay male body during the AIDS crisis, gay men were painted to be a diseased body and a detriment to society. Leo Bersani suggests that from this period stems the notion of individual truth, as gay men began to embrace the authenticity of their status as a marginalized sexuality identity.<sup>10</sup> If we are meant to celebrate the individual truths of people, what happens when particular truths do not align with others?<sup>11</sup> For individuals in the gay community, "live your truth" aligns itself with a very real notion of the "gay truth" or the narrative of

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<sup>8</sup> Conor Friedersdorf, "The Difference Between Speaking 'Your Truth' and 'The Truth,'" *The Atlantic*, January 8, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/01/the-power-and-perils-of-speaking-your-truth/549968/>.

<sup>9</sup> Consider the influx of "fake news" that has come forward throughout the presidency of Donald Trump in America. News may of course take a slant on an issue, but at the end of the day if the news is "fake" where are we supposed to locate truth within our country? Trump's language has been parodically adopted by RuPaul's Drag Race contestant Monique Heart with the catch phrase, "Facts are facts, America," in an attempt to insinuate that personal knowledge outweighs the potential for legitimate truth.

<sup>10</sup> Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?: And Other Essays* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Because we are existing in a time where we should all "live our truths," it is inevitable that individual truths will not align. Consider a white supremacist living their "truth": clearly this is not the truth that Oprah wanted to come forward, but with the language of individual autonomy and agency in this era of "living your truth," the potential for this rhetoric to be adopted by hateful groups is bound to occur.

homosexuality that has been developing for centuries. Truth, especially when attached to an identity, is predicated on embodied, lived experiences, and for gay men this comes through frequenting bars, engaging in casual sexual encounters, being exposed to homophobia, consuming film and television, including pornography, reading literature, etc. If we are to understand identity and the self to be a socially constructed phenomenon,<sup>12</sup> what is to say that truth then is not also just a socially constructed entity?

In this chapter, I will explore the construction of truth found in the gay master narrative and how that truth has aided in the production of Collard's notion of the post-gay. Queer scholar Bertram J. Cohler explains in *Writing Desire: Sixty Years of Gay Autobiography* that "media portrayal of gay culture has been important in making this master narrative of gay identity,"<sup>13</sup> and in turn the construction of particular notions of gay identity through popularized media representations creates particular truths that are held as the standard within the community. While Cohler is not wrong—we as gay people are an amalgamation of various pieces of identity within a socially constructed framework—it is difficult to agree that there is a master narrative to being gay. My qualms with the notion of the master narrative are not unique. Jean-François Lyotard already explored the problematics of the grand, or master, narrative in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, explaining that the difficulty in producing master narratives, and holding them to be all-encompassing truths, produces particulars that try

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<sup>12</sup> See, Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. One* (London, England: Penguin Vintage, 1990), Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York City, NY: Routledge, 1990), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemeology of the Closet* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Bertram J. Cohler, *Writing Desire: Sixty Years of Gay Autobiography* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), 11.



to make sense of history as one singular entity.<sup>14</sup> Concerns about what does and does not get to go into the narrative are important to discern within the realm of the gay master narrative. In his book, Cohler discusses how the master narrative aligns with a particular version of what it means to be gay in America—an identity that sits alongside the post-gay identity and is one that we recognize as being the “gay truth.”

The master narrative follows the following trajectory:

- The gay man goes through the process of coming to terms with his identity, generally starting out in a closed-minded place where there is little to no acceptance from the people in his life.
- He then moves to a large metropolitan city to discover the culture that has been missing from his life.
- Hate and homophobia shape the majority of the narrative as the gay man continues to struggle with his identity, before finally engaging with the process of self-acceptance.

It is a narrative that makes sense; the truth behind it is also not a lie. Yet, it is not the narrative that every gay man has or gets to experience. While this is not an attempt to trivialize or invalidate the lived experiences of the people whose narratives align with the master narrative of the gay truth, I seek to problematize this notion of living your truth when not all truths exist within the foregrounded framework. What happens to an individual when their personal truth does not fit the already codified gay truth that has been constructed for decades? The notion of living your truth is a beautiful farce because

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<sup>14</sup> Jean- François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

it seems pure and honest on the surface level, but beneath that lies the difficulty of discerning truths that do not align within frameworks that indicate what is, and what is not, correct or valid.

In turn, truth becomes something that creates the stabilized/destabilized binary of the gay community that was touched upon in the introduction. The post-gay that James Collard penned in 1998 assumes a level of gay truth—arguing that we are no longer the gay community of the AIDS crisis and that we are stabilized in our position as sexual minorities.<sup>15</sup> Individuals that do not live within the post-gay identity structure that Collard has constructed must then live in a destabilized identity category where individual truth is then destabilized in turn, and often these particular destabilized truths do not fit within the structured narrative of the gay truth that presumes a stabilized identity. Friedrich Nietzsche explains in “On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense” that truth is simply something that we pretend to discover/find after we have already placed it in front of us.<sup>16</sup> Creating the master narrative of the gay truth stems from the narrativizing of individual truths within life-writing—by writing the story, the authors of these texts uncover some form of truth that was not “there” as such; instead, it was specifically placed there for them to find through their process of writing. Life-writing most often occurs many years after the text’s central events have occurred. This means that a layer of self-reflection mediates between the events that occurred and what is now narrated—between the real and its representation; this, in turn, raises questions about the degree of the narrative’s veracity. Cohler explains that the space between writing the

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<sup>15</sup> Collard, “Leaving the Gay Ghetto.”

<sup>16</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense,” *Friedrich Nietzsche on Rhetoric and Language*, ed. and trans. by Sander L. Gilman, Carole Blair, and David J. Parent (New York, NY: Oxford University Press: 1989) 250.

narrative and the lived experience often leads writers to cherry-pick details as well as psychologize their lived experiences in order to give audiences a more “authentic” view of their self.<sup>17</sup> The “truth” of these texts then becomes unclear as it is difficult to discern the difference between authenticity and what will make for a bestseller. Regardless, it is still important to understand that these narratives are constructing particular kinds of truths as we assume personal narrative to illustrate the reality of lived experiences.

While I could lead into a discussion of the ethics of the publishing industry and what narratives they are willing to purchase and provide to readers, I will instead focus on uncovering what exactly the “gay truth” is through the production of the gay master narrative found within life writing. The current state of truth within the contemporary gay community is of paramount interest, especially how it connects to the notion of the post-gay; however, in order to understand where we are today we must unpack the history of the gay narrative that has brought us to this point. Much of Cohler’s discussion of life writing stems from his belief that we are an amalgamation of the histories of homosexuality throughout time and that identifying ourselves today as gay men is simply a reproduction and reformation of identities of the past. In order to better unpack the “truth” that is derived from the gay master narrative, I will make a catalog of popular gay life writing to showcase the similarities found within the texts to illustrate the construction of a particular kind of truth. Before delving into the catalog, however, I will provide an analysis of Dennis Cooper’s *Frisk* in order to illustrate the process of discovering truth as it will become a metaphor outlining the fascination and desire to find truth. Beyond Cooper and the catalog of texts, I will take a closer look at John Rechy’s

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<sup>17</sup> Cohler, *Writing Desire*, 4.

*City of Night* to illustrate the difficulty in finding truth within life-writing and what that ultimately means for this tricky notion of the gay truth and the gay master narrative.

### **Frisking for Truth**

*Frisk* is almost exclusively a novel about discovering/uncovering truth. The novel's title itself defines a searching of the body for things that are out of sight. From the outset, Dennis happens upon pictures of snuff pornography, inciting his fascination with violence and sex, as well as his desire to understand what happened to the boy being killed in the photos. The photos become the object of fascination as they are both a physical manifestation of the sex act and a mystery to uncover because of the lack of context surrounding them. He ultimately discovers that the images were staged and did not showcase the truth, as he had assumed they would: Dennis learns that the boy in the photos was still alive, and that therefore the truth to which the photos laid claim was a lie.<sup>18</sup> Andrew Benjamin explains that photos and photography as an art form construct a difficult notion of reality for audiences because we perceive them to be real even if we know that they are not, and yet "in the beginning [of photography] it [the photograph] was the reality of things."<sup>19</sup> André Bazin, in turn, argues that a photographic image is "the creation of an ideal world in the likeness of the real, with its own temporal destiny."<sup>20</sup> As photography has morphed over time it is no longer simply just a snapshot within a

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<sup>18</sup> Dennis Copper, *Frisk* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1991) 29. After turning a trick gone wrong with partner Julian, Dennis asks Henry if he has ever been in pornography. This simple question breaks the illusion of the snuff pornography of his youth, by seeing the dying boy alive in front of him many years later.

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Benjamin, "What, in Truth, is Photography? Notes After Kracauer," *Oxford Literary Review* 32, no. 2 (December 2010), 189.

<sup>20</sup> André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," trans. Hugh Gray, *Film Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (Summer, 1960), 6.

moment; instead, photos can be staged, edited, etc., thereby removing the truth and authenticity from the photos themselves, even if they are still a physical representation of real things. This is not to say that the analogue photos that Bazin was speaking to could not also be manipulated, rather that photography of today is able to manipulate the photographic image in faster, easier, and simpler ways. For viewers of photos, though, a sense of reality is still attached to them: we perceive the contents of the images to be real people, real things, real scenarios. The contents of the photos exist because they existed before the camera took the picture. For Dennis, the snuff pornography he saw was real—a young boy was being murdered in the midst of sexual intercourse. These snuff photos constructed a truth of a narrative for young Dennis: they became his obsession, shaping his sexual identity to align with what he saw at such a young age.

His desire to enact violence during sex comes to a head when he discloses his own personal truth:

Maybe . . . if I hadn't seen this . . . snuff. Photographs. Back when I was a kid. I thought the boy in them was actually dead for years, and by the time I found out they were posed photographs, it was too late. I already wanted to live in a world where some boy I didn't personally know could be killed and his corpse made available to the public, or to me anyway.<sup>21</sup>

The perceived truth that was located in the photographs became the truth for Dennis, something that he allowed to consume his personal narrative because the medium of the photo played into the notion of perceived truth. The scenario in the photo was staged in order to give the impression of realness—Dennis believed it to be real, and therefore that

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<sup>21</sup> Cooper, Frisk, 70.

belief became translated into the truth. The truth and authenticity *of the experience* became the all-consuming force that pushed Dennis into this particular world of sexual deviance.

Violence and sex become all-consuming within the narrative of *Frisk* as Dennis outlines a series of killing sprees that happen while he is living in Amsterdam in an abandoned windmill. He details the acts of the sexual and murderous accounts in a series of letters he sends to various people that have at some point been integral in his life as a way of reconnecting, as well as an attempt to get someone to believe him. Julian, a past boyfriend, is the only person who takes the bait and travels to meet Dennis with his kid brother, Kevin. While the visit is filled with a sexual foray that is distantly similar to the sexual fantasies of their youth, Julian ultimately returns to Dennis because he wants to see whether or not the letters were *true*, which leads him to find out the actual truth:

. . . at some point that I couldn't and wouldn't kill anyone, no matter how persuasive the fantasy is . . . So I started sending letters to people who already knew me, thinking they'd either write back and give me some sort of objective analysis, or else relate to the fantasy, come here, and give me the courage or amorality or whatever to actually kill somebody in league with them. You're the only ones who ever answered, though.<sup>22</sup>

Julian went to Dennis as a way to discover whether the acts mentioned in the letters were true or not. This process of discovery was meant as a way for Julian to relieve himself of the guilt he had after reading through Dennis's account of the murders of several young boys. There is also something to be said for Dennis in his construction of the truth in

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 123.

these letters. In many ways he recreates the initial snuff pornography he saw as a young boy through this fantasy in his letters. Written documentation of the account is what draws Julian in the first place because of the use of life-writing techniques. The letter is written as if it were an autobiography of sorts, which assumes a level of authenticity within the narrative, a sense of truth. Julian becomes the metaphor for this analysis of the gay master narrative and the notion of uncovering the gay truth because of his search to find the truth in the situation he is presented with, which ultimately leads him to redefine the truth.

Importantly, the written *truth* that Dennis provides for his readers turns out to be a falsified record to encourage a response. He attempts to coerce communication with the recipients of the letters as a way to try and live out the fantasy in his head. The letters became more an object for personal satisfaction as Dennis uses the pornographic writing to encourage the fantasy that had been playing out in his head for years before sending the letters. Dennis's fictionalized letters resemble the concerns that Cohler has about the process of life writing, as it delves into territory that can easily lead to falsification in order to produce a story that is more compelling or that draws forth certain kinds of responses. The gay master narrative does not follow the narrative found in *Frisk*; however, it does follow a succinct story line that can be read in various life-writings across the written record. I am not trying to reframe the truth in the way that Julian found out Dennis. Instead, I seek to unpack what exactly formulates the gay truth within the gay master narrative. Julian and Dennis's discovery within *Frisk* instead allow for a symbolic analysis of what the truth really is.

### Bringing the Master Narrative to the Table

To begin the discussion of the found truth in the gay master narrative I look to Cohler's work on gay life-writing and his understanding of how identity formation and sexual liberation is embedded within these particular kinds of texts. Most of Cohler's analysis places value on the maintenance of history within memoirs, diaries, autobiographies, etc. because they become the only primary documents that gay people have from particular periods of American history. For the gay community, life-writing texts have become a necessity as so much of queer history is never written down or kept for future generations—our history has been one of oral tradition for so long. Cohler also places importance on the function of challenging "one's understanding of self"<sup>23</sup> within these texts because of how life-writing enhances one's ability for self-reflection. There is merit in what Cohler has outlined in *Writing Desire*; however, the understandings of self, the narrative structures, and the content of the published record of gay life-writing all start to sound familiar when put close together. For Lyotard, the production/reproduction of the same narrative generate the overall master narrative. Gay narratives, found in life-writing published throughout the twentieth century, primarily function within a set narrative structure. It is that set structure that is reproduced, thus creating the gay master narrative. The master narrative becomes a constructed version of an individual's particular reality, and when all the narratives appear the same that narrative in turn constructs the truth of that reality as an encompassing reality for all.

I have compiled a table from a sampling of gay life-writing from the twentieth century in order to illustrate the sameness found within the narrative structures. I have

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<sup>23</sup> Cohler, 16.



divided the table into three sections for spacing purposes in order to showcase the similarities within the narratives through the beginning, middle, and end—this division follows the narrative trajectory outlined within the introduction of this chapter. This is not a comprehensive list and has limitations in that it is not showing all of the narratives of gay life-writing in the written record, but the sampling does illustrate particular themes found within a majority of these kinds of texts.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> It would seem that the digital humanities could be useful here, since their tools could help us map more comprehensively what I did here “by hand.”

Author: Title	Beginning	Middle	End
<p>Alan Helms:  <i>Young Man from the Provinces: A Gay Life Before Stonewall</i><sup>25</sup></p>	<p>Midwestern (Indiana), Protestant family who struggled through the Depression. Physically abusive family life. Did not align with traditional gender roles, called himself “sissy.” Eventually realizes his difference from normative society and feels empty, something is missing. Moves to New York City to attend Columbia University.</p>	<p>Helms grows into quite the handsome young man, which allows him to gain influence with others, allowing him to enter the “gay life” of the 1950s in New York. Swedish roommate, Dick, helps Helms gain the confidence to become a fully realized version of himself. A cocktail party provides Helms entry into the world of social elites he has always wanted. Sexual liberation and fantasy pepper the whole of this middle section.</p>	<p>As Helms grows older he realizes that the party is coming to an end, and he begins a downward decent to try and recover whatever was lost. He tries to find a younger lover in order to recapture his own fading youth. In the final moments of the narrative, Helms explores how he has lived with so many regrets about loathing himself and using his sexual escapades as a mask for the true pain he felt his whole life.</p>
<p>Andrew Tobias:  <i>The Best Little Boy in the World</i>  <i>The Best Little Boy in the World Grows Up</i><sup>26</sup></p>	<p>Raised in an upper-middle class family, Tobias is a self-proclaimed “best little boy in the world” and restrains himself from doing anything naughty. This includes hiding his homosexuality at a young age. Focuses his attention at succeeding in school and controlling his body to showcase his beauty. Does not masturbate because of the</p>	<p>While at Harvard he attempts to find other gay men like himself, but he struggles with allowing himself to delve into this particular lifestyle. Called upon to serve in the Vietnam War, but because he says he is a homosexual he is exempt from serving. He finally admits to friends that he is a gay man, but still struggles to find his way into the gay world that</p>	<p>The second volume of Tobias’ memoirs handles the period of time before, during, and slightly after the discovery of AIDS and the AIDS crisis. It chronicles partners and friends loved and lost to the disease. Etched into this memoir Tobias recounts his work within the world of activism to combat the AIDS crisis. In conclusion Tobias discloses that</p>

<sup>25</sup> Alan Helms, *Young Man from the Provinces: A Gay Life Before Stonewall* (Winchester, MA: Faber and Faber, 1995).

<sup>26</sup> Andrew Tobias, *The Best Little Boy in the World* (New York City, NY: Ballantine, 1993), *The Best Little Boy in the World Grows Up* (New York City, NY: Random House, 1998).

	shameful thoughts he has about boys. Forces himself to like girls but is repulsed when a girl forces herself on him and kisses him with tongue. Leaves to attend Harvard.	was New York during the 60s. He finally breaks into the scene and gets the gay education he had always wanted. Similarly to Helms' life, Tobias begins to seek out the underbelly of the New York social scene, meeting men, and finally gaining a positive self-image.	depression and anxiety rule the gay man's life because of living a life with so much stigma. The trauma of youth is engrained within gay men that it becomes impossible to ever fully remove it from a personal identity. He ends his memoir with a plea for acceptance and tolerance moving forward.
Tim Miller: <i>Shirts and Skins</i> <i>Body Blows</i> <sup>27</sup>	Born in Whittier, California, an idyllic southern California suburban city, Miller sees his childhood as a WASP hypocrisy. Miller exhibited early sexual fascination by masturbating on the roots of the family's orange tree. He developed slower than the rest of the boys his age. During high school he realizes the implications of his same-sex attractions during a football game of shirts and skins. He finally comes out to himself and a female friend in college, who introduces him to a series of gay men to help him explore his sexuality. He makes sexual contact with a boy named	Fed up with Southern California, Miller moves to San Francisco, but bewildered by the Harvey Milk assassination moves to New York City. Sexual freedom welcomes him as he is able to move from bed to bed freely post the sexual revolution. During the eighties Miller become a queer activist. Worked as a construction worker with straight men by day and experimented with radical theater at night. Miller believed he would never be able to find a stable relationship, so he took to anonymous sex with men on the Lower East Side. Finally he	Sex and death become interwoven within Miller's narrative as people begin to die left and right. Miller himself had unprotected sex, showcasing the complications of sexual desire during a period of time where the body became its own battleground. In a final moment Miller allowed himself to be penetrated by a man he knew to be living with AIDS, seeking out the disease like a gift of sorts—in order to feel closer to the person and the people who were disappearing at rapid rates.

<sup>27</sup> Tim Miller, *Shirts and Skins* (Los Angeles, CA: Alyson, 1997), *Body Blows: Six Performances* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002).

	David who performs at the same dance Studio as Miller.	lands himself Doug, but the relationship does not last long.	
Marc Adams: <i>The Preacher's Son</i> <sup>28</sup>	For Adams, growing up in a fundamentalist Christian household, the outside world became a source of temptation because it offered possibilities he could not find in his closed off world. As a child he developed a strong friendship with a boy named Stephen whom he wished to hold hands with and kiss. Upon finding out, Adams' family sends him to a Christian school that physically disciplined students. A particular Sunday service illuminates the narrative that God sent AIDS as a way to punish the sinners in the world, leaving Adams with an intense feeling of guilt for his own burgeoning sins. As a means of escape Adams attends Liberty University upon finishing high school.	At Liberty, Adams' desire for men becomes ever more present in his life. Over the Holiday break he has his first sexual encounter with a boy named Todd, who quickly admonishes Adams for making it impossible for him to be a minister now that he has had sexual contact with a man. The two continue to contact each other after the holiday, but Todd marries a woman and leaves Liberty. Over the course of Adams' time at Liberty the sermons become increasingly homophobic. Upon graduating Adams decides to travel to California, but before he makes the flight Todd contacts him again, and the two decide to flee together.	When they arrive in California the two reconnect sexually in a hotel. They reconnect after years apart, and the scars of the past dissolve. They decide to move Los Angeles together. They disclose the status of their relationship with their families, only for them to disapprove. Particular Adams is affected by the hate that came from Todd's mother, who at one time was kind towards Adams. He finishes the memoir hoping that one day they will be able to remedy the relationship that had gone away.
Kirk Read: <i>How I Learned to Snap: A Small-Town Coming-Out and Coming-of-Age Story</i> <sup>29</sup>	Growing up in Virginia, Read's family life was that of a traditional Christian family. It was in junior high that Read	At the age of fourteen, Read had his first sexual experience with a boy named Rich, who was in college at the time. The	Read builds a relationship with an older lover, Walker, with whom he ends up spending almost every night. The two

<sup>28</sup> Marc Adams, *The Preacher's Son* (Seattle, WA: Window Books, 1996).

<sup>29</sup> Kirk Read, *How I Learned to Snap: A Small-Town Coming-Out and Coming-of-Age Story* (Athens, GA: Hill Street Press, 2001).

	<p>began to deal with his same-sex attractions. His childhood was filled with activities that boys his age were not supposed to enjoy—reading and theater were not the traditional Southern boy hobbies. Much of Read’s adolescence was filled with teasing and bullying, as boys his age would call him “fag.” His life became a secret when he would hide things like cigarettes, condoms, and jockstraps in various places in his room.</p>	<p>two maintained romantic and sexual contact for a while and Read began to feel intense desire for older men. Having a car became a means for freedom, as the open road allowed him to travel to find sexual partners in private. Throughout this period, Read never identified as gay; he only knew that he liked having sex with men. Read’s family life was little affected by his burgeoning gay life—his mother understood and supported, while his father was weary and scared for his future.</p>	<p>travel and experience the fear of contracting HIV together only to find they are both negative. Walker fears that Read will grow up and leave him, but the two stayed together for some time. This all coincides with Read’s final year in high school. The memoir ends with Read’s high school graduation, and his fear of leaving Walker for college. The two-hour drive from Richmond seems too much for him. In the epilogue of the memoir Read comments on how his upbringing was different than many young gay men—his parents were supportive, loving, and encouraging.</p>
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When looking at the first section of each of these texts, we notice that the gay master narrative is one that showcases the profound difference that the authors felt during their formative years. Names like “sissy,” “fag,” and “queer” are used throughout the first section of all of these queer memoirs. The process of name calling becomes the first step in the construction of identity for these young narrators. Didier Eribon explains in *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self* that the construction of gay selfhood is predicated on the creation of difference between those of higher status within hierarchical structures; insulting slurs like “faggot,” “fairy,” “homo,” “gay,” etc. mark the initial distinction between sexual minorities before they are able to identify themselves as such.<sup>30</sup> Because insult is such an important piece of identity formation for gay men the authors of these texts expose this piece of their personal truth in order to orient themselves within the culturally understood narrative, where young gay boys get made fun of for being different. The inclusion of this moment in the identification process is also used as a stepping stone in order to complicate the author’s self-identification process by the end of the text. Transformative identity experience of life-writing is often the key feature of these texts because it has the ability to illuminate something that gay men have experienced/have heard of within a singular narrative. While this narrative of insult as a formative moment in the author’s life is common for many gay men, it should not be viewed as a narrative for all—specifically as the narrative itself shifts to allow for a transformative experience of self-acceptance, acknowledgement, and growth.

The trajectory of many of these texts showcases tame versions of the upbringing and formative years of a young gay man’s life. None of the authors were kicked out for

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<sup>30</sup> Didier Eribon, *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*, trans. by Michael Lucey (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) 1-12.

displaying effeminate tendencies, which can be identified as a more common experience for gay men in the twentieth century—a phenomenon that is ever present in America today as the issue of homeless gay youth continues to plague young people across the country.<sup>31</sup> Abuse was present within these narratives—Marc Adam’s story taking shape within the closed doors of Christian school that would often physically discipline children that showed homosexual tendencies at an early age<sup>32</sup>—but the abuse was trimmed down in an attempt to keep audiences from understanding the full scope of lived experiences of many gay men.

Taming the gay master narrative introduces the problem of what it means to ultimately erase particular realities from the *truth* of gay male experience. These narratives were published from major publishers like Random House and Faber & Faber, meaning the potential readership was larger than just the queer population. Publishing narratives that fit within a safe narrative space where the effects are not graphic allows for straight audiences to feel concern without having to experience how difficult the experience is for many. If narratives exposed too much truth about the experience of being gay then the gay master narrative would edge away from a culturally understood truth. Narratives like Kirk Read’s allow for straight audiences to see a boy who, while having a rough upbringing, still had parents who loved and accepted him, with his mother even supporting his relationships with older men.<sup>33</sup> Read’s story shapes an understanding of the post-gay identity wherein the truth that is explored within the narrative exists as a

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<sup>31</sup> Laura E. Durso and Gary J. Gates, “Serving Our Youth: Findings from a National Survey of Services Providers Working with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth Who are Homeless or at Risk of Being Homeless,” The Williams Institute. Findings illustrate how 46 percent of homeless LGBTQ youth fled the house because of abuse following parental figures finding out about their sexuality.

<sup>32</sup> Adams, *The Preacher’s Son*.

<sup>33</sup> Read, *How I Learned to Snap*.

way of promoting a particular form of homosexuality. Post-gay identity is the succinct and pretty narrative where hate and discrimination take a back seat for the narrator. If audiences are asked to read about the truth of an experience like brutal violence, homelessness, explicit sexual situations, or violent sexual encounters then we are asking audiences to shift their ideals about homosexuality. Narratives that explore the darker sides of being gay exist, but they are not as widely published and read. The experiences of these five authors are certainly not wrong or invalid; however, the problem of only publishing “pretty” texts about gay male experience is that it erases the stories of certain experiences from the narrative of gay men in America.

At this point it is important that the five authors that are outlined in the above chart are all white, physically fit, and attractive (as many claimed in their texts); grew up in the middle to upper class; and were raised in Christian households. This, then, becomes the image of gay men in America when most gay life-writing is done by white men: the space for men of color quickly fades away. James Baldwin is one of the only names that comes to the tip of the tongue when considering the canon of gay male authors. The market is saturated in the experiences of white gay men who fit a particular identity category that is marketable and palatable—for the purposes of this thesis a post-gay identity category. Considering the gaytriarchy that I discussed in the introduction, the truth of the gay master narrative becomes one that illustrates a particular kind of normative identity, one that is white, fit, and attractive. Authors that look like this kind of gay man are going to be able to sell their story because their own individual truth is perceived as more valid than others.



Beyond the initial moments that center around identity construction, each text then moves to a moment of escape. Escape foregrounds the middle section of each text, whether that is through a life (Helms, Tobias, Miller, and Adams) or weekend getaways from a hidden life at home (Read). The experience of escapism follows along with George Chauncey's work in *Gay New York*, which outlines the historic gay exodus to coasts and port cities that occurred at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>34</sup> Places like New York City, San Francisco, and Los Angeles became safe havens for gay men because of their position as transient spaces that experienced a flow of people in and out every day. These memoirs follow the same trajectory; however, mobility is a privilege that cannot be afforded by many. As stated above, these men all lived a middle to upper-middle class economic life and had the ability and freedom of mobility. For many other gay men, however, this is impossible. I think about rural queer youth and how movement becomes both a physical and economic endeavor. Without proper funds, moving to Chicago, San Francisco, or New York City is nearly impossible. But because we see escape as something that is central to these narratives it becomes something that is expected of gay men to do.

Truth and the gay master narrative are so intertwined that it is nearly impossible to separate the two, especially considering how we have moved into a time in the gay community that has mobilized the phrase, "live your truth." Of course, we want to encourage the deployment of individual truth and identity, but in the history of public, or "out," homosexuality, certain truths work better than others. This is why the publishing industry is oversaturated with white men writing gay novels. Having specific kinds of gay

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<sup>34</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

men writing the narrative of what it means to be gay in America paints the picture of homosexuality in a particular kind of way. Gay men in America are white, well off, attractive, physically fit, and generally live in a densely populated metropolitan city. This becomes the ideal that the rest of the gay world strives for: it is the *truth* that we want to have because it is the only *truth* that we have ever seen. This perceived truth paves the way for the post-gay because it creates the ideal narrative identity—one that is present and okay with existing in that happy state that is the here and now.

This search for personal truth is also narrativized within the final section of each of the novels listed in the table above. Each author experiences a problematization of the self and is forced to confront their personal reality to come to terms with where they are now. In order to become fully realized as a gay man, you have to acknowledge or align yourself to the truth that is present at the time, and for many of these authors that truth was outlined by the previous age cohort—replicating and reproducing the same narratives over and over again. By the end of each of these texts, each of the five authors has this moment where they finally accept the reality in which they find themselves.

After I compiled this table of various pieces of gay life-writing from the twentieth century, I realized how Lyotard's assertion that the master narrative is problematic for its ability to reproduce the same story over and over again rings true within this marginalized community as well. There is a hierarchy within the gay community, as is evident from the narratives that we are willing and able to publish for public consumption. The truth that is found within these individual stories constructs the perceived narrative of what it means to be gay in America—whether that narrative existed beforehand or not, is hard to say. As Cohler explains, the work of gay life-writers

both influences and is influenced by the broader culture that surrounds them. If this is correct then it is important to recognize how memoir influences the overall culture of gay men. Cohler also argues that life-writing can be seen as inherently problematic because of the space falsification can take up within the writing process—what we are reading may not always be the truth. This is what we can see in *Frisk*, as discussed above: the letter that Dennis writes to his past lovers is only “kind of” true because the events did exist in his mind and were true to him, but they never really happened. The same is true of the snuff photographs that Dennis sees as a child—they were both real and not real. In the realm of the gay master narrative, it is imperative to ask whose truth are we reading? That question ultimately leads Julien to search for the truth with Dennis in Amsterdam at the end of Cooper’s novel. Julien illustrates for us the fear that comes from wanting to understand whether the truth is true, but ultimately, he exposes the reality that a singular truth is not necessarily the overall truth.

### ***City of Night* and the Problem of Truth in “Autobiography”**

John Rechy’s first novel, *City of Night*, sits in a very complicated space within the discussion of gay life-writing because it is a work of fiction, even though Rechy has expressed that the events within the text are based on personal experience. I look to Rechy’s novel as a way to further complicate the last section of this first chapter, which seeks to locate truth found in life-writing texts because of how the novel sits in a space of both true-life events and fantasy. Analyzing this juxtaposition of truth and fantasy in Rechy’s writing, Kevin Arnold explains, “what is important, then, is not whether the novels are ‘true’ or not . . . what matters is the way that fantasy overwhelms this question

of the truth in Rechy's writing."<sup>35</sup> Fantasy supersedes the real within writing that we assume to be "truthful," so much so that the fantasy becomes the truth to the point where we believe that it *must* be true. Events that must be true are also illustrated within Cooper's *Frisk*, as it is a text that shows that the limits of fantasy and lived experience can be blurred—the snuff pornography and Dennis's letter. To this end, it does not matter if the gay master narrative is holistically *truthful*—in the way that it discloses the exact minutia of an experience—because regardless of whether or not it is the *truth* the fictional elements of life-writing become the reality of what it means to be gay, as they *must* be true.

Beyond the realm of the truth and mystery found within *City of Night* and the gay master narrative, we as an audience are able to fill in the gaps in our understanding of a narrative. Because the narrative of gay men is extremely pervasive, the understanding of the untold events within a story are able to be understood based on a reader's understanding of the narrative as a universal whole.<sup>36</sup> At this point in time, the narrative of what it means to be gay in America has solidified in many ways. Of course, small variations exist within the master narrative, but it all comes back to a particular series of events and themes that reoccur within texts. *City of Night* produces its own mythos because it is the "'myth' of gay male culture in more ways than one."<sup>37</sup> The myth becomes the juncture of what we all strive for, as Lyotard exposes in *The Postmodern Condition*. The mythic metanarrative constructs a sense of stability and structure—and for individuals in marginalized spaces, this practical stability is the ideal.

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<sup>35</sup> Kevin Arnold, "'Male and Male and Male': John Rechy and the Scene of Representation," *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 67, no. 1 (Spring 2011), 116.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 120.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 117.

Rechy's novel as a text to understand the gay master narrative and the notion of post-gay identity is challenging considering how the narrator's identity is constantly fluctuating between stabilized and destabilized. Rechy is assumed to be the nameless narrator because, as Arnold suggests, we fill in the gap of the identity-less narrator based on the understanding that Rechy's text was inspired by his real-life events. The events within the novel follow a narrative structure that is similar to those of the other novelists' experiences. El Paso is the starting point of the text, which the narrator needs to escape, and the form of the novel becomes a *Bildungsroman* as he constantly moves from one gay epicenter to another. While formally Rechy's novel resembles the other texts, the main difference is that the narrator has a moment of disclosure in regard to his sexual identity. He is never once described as gay, but rather he is presented as a man who has sex with other men for money and pleasure. He constantly is found in difficult positions where he must negotiate his identity, and more often than not his choice is to run from it. The narrator's refusal of sexual identification, and his go with the flow attitude about sex, are "key features of contemporary gay [and] lesbian literature."<sup>38</sup> While the narrator may be living a very literal destabilized life based solely on his career as a hustler, the use of drugs, and his constant movement, his identity is actually stabilized because it is never in flux. We never know whether he is gay or not because he is constructed in a way that eases into its own stability; therefore, his identity is never forced to destabilize. The narrator's stabilized identity resonates with Collard's notion of the post-gay because he

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<sup>38</sup> Jennifer Moon, "Cruising John Rechy's City of Night: Queer Subjectivity, Intimacy, and Counterpublicity," *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory* 15, no. 10 (2006): page-page. Here, 50. Moon's discussion offers an interesting insight into the space between shame and narcissism found within queer texts. She ultimately believes that queer characters within contemporary texts live within the space between the two poles.

has in some ways evolved from being gay by evading the political zone of queerness as futurity as he is only ever living in the here and now.

Up to this point I have stressed how gay life-writing is an act of stabilization because of its ability to construct a particular truth structure that gay men are supposed to attain. While *City of Night* does exist in a space of both truth and fiction, the narrative leans into a perceived truth because the narrative is *assumed* to be truthful. Ultimately, truth is important in this discussion because it produces a feeling of stability, a foothold for marginalized identities to legitimize their experiences as real and valid. That sense of stability gets us closer to understanding Collard's notion of the post-gay, which wraps itself around the pretense that homosexuality has stabilized as an identity category. Post-gay identity has stabilized to a point where being gay is now normative. Homosexuality is very much still a minority status in terms of population, but the point of the post-gay is to move beyond marginalized minority status and live life as if it were normal. The unnamed narrator in Rechy's novel is living in a post-gay narrative by disavowing the political positioning of identification. His actions may be destabilized—hustling, drug use, alcohol consumption, nomadic lifestyle, etc.—but that simple omission of self-identification places the narrator beyond the boundaries of identity, like Collard's post-gay asks of us. Gay truth and the gay master narrative operate in a way to normalize the experiences of homosexuality within particular frameworks of what is and is not ok to make public. The stabilization of gay male identity through life-writing creates a real distance between authentic queerness and the assimilation into a heteronormative society. “Live your truth” does not mean to perform authentically but rather to align with specific

notions of what truth means and experience life in the same ways as the culture asks you to.

## Seeing the American Gay: Hollywood's Production of the Gay Master Narrative Through Normalizing Praxis

For nearly forty-years, queerness was kept in the closet in cinemas across America. In 1930, Will Hays, a former postmaster general, successfully implemented the Motion Picture Production Code, colloquially known as The Hays Code or simply “The Code,” which was used to outlaw certain images from appearing in films that hit the big screen.<sup>39</sup> By 1934, The Code held its grip around all films that were distributed around the country, and all images that were explicitly queer were held away from the public for the fear of recruiting the youth to join the ranks of deviant individuals. While the explicit representation of queer imagery was strictly prohibited, it still seeped its way on the screen through coded imagery, symbols, and movements that could be read by the LGBTQ community at large. Much of the first half of the twentieth century for queer individuals was learning a literacy of codes to find fellow brothers and sisters.<sup>40</sup> It was not until the late sixties that The Code began to lose its stronghold, and in 1968 the MPAA released its rating system of cinema, a predecessor of the system we have today. Queerness and queer imagery could finally appear back on the screen, could be explicitly talked about and represented, and could thus inform the general public of queer people's existence in America more publicly. Of course there were still restrictions on what could be shown to American audiences, reflecting particular attitudes towards queer individuals throughout time.

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<sup>39</sup> Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1987), 31.

<sup>40</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*.



As queer images started to appear more frequently in American cinema, the narrative of queerness continued to be controlled by individuals who occupied positions of power, particularly straight, white men. Their power over the film industry dictated what could and could not be shown to the public—their fear of what queer images might do to the larger American public forced queer people deeper into the closet. Queer Film Historian Vito Russo's 1987 book *The Celluloid Closet* is one of the most formative texts dedicated to cataloguing queer representation on screen, from the birth of cinema to roughly the start of the 1980s. Russo's work illustrated the forgotten memory of a queer cinematic world and created an archive of knowledge about which many young queer people, myself included, would never have known without him. *The Celluloid Closet* was so influential that five years after Russo's death a film adaptation of the book was produced in the hopes of wider consumption by mass audiences of this forgotten narrative. The film updated the book, providing analyses of films not yet available for Russo's scrutiny.<sup>41</sup> It extended the work that Russo did, including interviews with notable queer and not queer members of the film industry, clips of films, and films that had come out since his death. Russo's work is especially important with regard to the forgotten years of queer cinema—films made during the period of The Code—and offers readers a chance to explore how queerness subverted mainstream regulations during a politically contested time when the lives of queer folks were both devalued and criminalized.

While the forgotten years of queer cinema are an important aspect of queer cinema, the years since The Code's demise are also crucial for our ability to understand how the silver screen depicted queerness and specifically homosexuality. In the year

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<sup>41</sup> Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, *The Celluloid Closet*, directed by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman (1995; Sony Pictures Classics, 1996), Film.

following the dissolve of The Code and the introduction of the MPAA rating system, John Schlesinger's *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) appeared for the public with an X rating—a rating designed to keep young people out of the theaters. Schlesinger's film was one of the first publicly released graphic representations of homosexuality for many Americans to see. A film like *Midnight Cowboy* was positioned in a way to shock audiences, using a classic heterosexual motif, the American frontier cowboy, and placing him within the seething clutches of the gay underground.<sup>42</sup> This discordant imagery following a period of nearly forty-years of censorship elucidated a new understanding of gay images—the gay man was no longer relegated to the closet but instead was very much public, while at the same time deviant. However graphic the imagery of Schlesinger's film was, it nevertheless managed to receive the Academy Award for both Best Picture and Best Director in 1969—illustrating the importance of this kind of representation during the period. It was shock-value gay narratives that became socially accepted and celebrated by the Academy, with later films such as *Philadelphia* (1993) and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) eventually being celebrated at the award ceremony. Following Schlesinger's film, gay men slowly found their way to the silver screen; however, their image remained at the behest of overarching cultural assumptions of their identity.

*Midnight Cowboy* was productive in that it brought forth gay images to the public, but the images that such films produce still represent/depict gay men in very reductive ways that abide by culturally succinct imagery of what it means to be gay. As this thesis continues to explore the problematics of the gay master narrative, and how that narrative aided in the creation of the post-gay, it is necessary to unpack how gay narratives have

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<sup>42</sup> Kevin Floyd, "Closing the (Heterosexual) Frontier: *Midnight Cowboy* as National Allegory," *Science & Society* 65, no. 1 (Spring, 2001), 113.

been produced on the silver screen. Hollywood remains, to this day, a powerhouse in the construction and control of American media consumption. While American cinema began to display images of homosexuality with greater frequency and overtness in the post-Stonewall era, Hollywood nevertheless continued to exert significant control of those images. Though The Code was no longer in effect, the regulatory practice of cinema was still there, dictating both the public and private lives of gay men in America. Gay men transformed for the public after The Code because he was literally displayed for audiences to see. No longer was being gay a secret; being gay now was something you could watch in front of your eyes.

Material representation, as images on the screen, of gay men is where the problem of post-Code gay cinema comes from. Only certain images of gay male culture were being represented on screen, and those were being mediated by overarching cultural power structures. As noted earlier, audiences could now see gay men and understand their existence through visual narrative representation. *Midnight Cowboy* illustrates the underbelly of gay culture: male prostitution, extreme poverty, as well as issues of health and the body. Because Schlesinger's film was the first explicit representation of gay male culture, this became the first image for American audiences to recognize the reality of gay men. While this seems like a progressive notion, introducing an aspect of American life to individuals who may never experience it, the narrativizing of gay culture through cinema also reduces the authenticity of experience because of how the images become inauthentic representations of power.

Inauthentic representations of the gay male experience appeared extensively in the previous chapter of this thesis in regard to the gay master narrative found in gay life-

writing. I now expand upon the previous chapter to understand how film imagery perpetuates the problematics of all-encompassing narratives. The construction of a master narrative for gay male culture creates that encompassing phenomenon that singles out particular truths found within the experiences of gay men. The narrative is one that people *want* to see, rather than an expansive look into the truth of the gay community. Whatever is marketable is what gets produced for consumption, and in producing particular narratives the experiences that are not found in them get written out of the record.<sup>43</sup> Film greatly impacted the gay master narrative by furthering the idea of what it meant to be gay in America through its visual representation of the narrative. Often, though, the narrative fit itself within prescriptive notions of the gay community, mediated by a straight male dominated film industry. A film like *Midnight Cowboy* produced images of underground gay culture because there was a cultural assumption at the time that gay men were living a deviant life, unseen and unheard of by the public. When Joe walks down the street, he sees gay men, dressed like him, selling their body for money. The American public could walk down the street and see these hustlers without truly understanding what exactly it meant. Gay male culture became commoditized through film by constructing the image of gay men for the majority of the American audience.

A point of distinction between this chapter and the last, which analyzed the gay master narrative exclusively written by gay men, is that here I will be focusing on films directed by both gay and straight male directors. The interest in separating the analysis of gay male cinema in this way is to better understand how very little the difference is in

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<sup>43</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*. Lyotard explores the problematics of the grand narrative and how producing one creates particulars for individuals to align themselves with, rather than allowing for authentic experiences.

representations of homosexuality on screen. Because of Hollywood's control of what types of homosexual images were able to be seen it did not necessarily matter if a film was directed by a straight or gay director; in fact, a heterosexual male gaze of homosexuality—no matter whether the director was or was not gay himself—was the only way through which to see gay male representations on the big screen. For audiences watching films like *Midnight Cowboy* and William Friedkin's *Cruising* (1980) it did not matter that Schlesinger was gay and Friedkin straight; all that mattered was that glimpse into the gay underworld that was supposed to be feared. Cinema portrayed the lives of gay men in the same ways that the public *believed* gay men to be. For both gay and straight directors the film representations of gay men were simply the already culturally assumed narratives of gay men. Thus, over time, as will be understood through this chapter, the image of the gay man began to change, but he was never his own person; rather, he always was/remained a culturally determined piece of gay identity. Through a brief and, to be sure, highly selective, chronology of post-Code gay cinema—Schlesinger's *Midnight Cowboy*, William Friedkin's *Cruising*, Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain*, and Greg Berlanti's *Love, Simon* (2018)—it will become evident that while the censorship powers of Hollywood were “lifted” in 1968 the narrative of homosexuality was still censored in ways that determined what was and was not allowed to be shown to the American public of real gay men's lives. Ultimately, the material reality of film constructed the bodily identity of the gay man, forcing audiences, both straight and queer, to perceive such representations of the gay man to be his true identity.

### **A “Straight” Cowboy and an Erasure of Gay Love**

As I already argued in the introduction of this chapter, Schlesinger's *Midnight Cowboy* was a formative film in the production of post-Code gay cinema. The brandishing of the X rating under the newly created MPAA system was both a tool to keep "the gay agenda" away from young people and a ploy to generate attention to a film about which everyone was talking. The X signaled to audiences that danger was in that movie theater and created an allure of mystery about what might be going on. Schlesinger's film came to the public as "the emergence of an increasingly visible and politically confrontational gay male culture" was on the rise.<sup>44</sup> The film premiered less than a month before the historic Stonewall Riots in New York City, which ushered in the start of the gay rights movement in the U.S. *Midnight Cowboy* was positioned in an important moment for the gay community, but in more ways than one the film offered a reductive look into gay male culture and thereby further perpetuated narrative ideals found in the already constructed gay master narrative. While the film did incorporate images of homosexuality it ultimately exposed a deeply problematic narrative of trauma, only showed gay sexual acts, and never allowed for audiences to see gay love on screen.

The film is a retelling of the traditional American western, wherein the cowboy moves west to find his fortune. Kevin Floyd discusses at length how Schlesinger's narrative is an attempt to "deterritorialize" the myth of the frontier by displacing the cowboy from the west and transplanting him to the city.<sup>45</sup> Joe Buck (Jon Voight) takes a bus from his Texas roots, where he was a local stud, to make his fortune as a hustler in New York City.<sup>46</sup> His literal movement eastward via bus displaces the narrative of the

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<sup>44</sup> Floyd, "Closing the (Heterosexual) Frontier," 101.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 102.

<sup>46</sup> John Schlesinger, *Midnight Cowboy*, directed by John Schlesinger (1969; United Artists, 1969), Film.

cowboy, as he is clad in traditional cowboy attire—tight jeans, button up, cowboy boots, and the infamous cowboy hat—but instead of riding horse he rides coach with a plethora of “normal” Americans who all live the transient life like him. A material future is constructed through Joe’s use of the bus, ushering in a contemporary feel rather than a traditionalist form of mobility on horseback. Floyd explores this notion of mobility as a distancing of traditional nationalist masculine identity by shifting the narrative of westward expansion to a more urbanized, less American America.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, Joe’s narrative of eastward movement is reminiscent of traditional narratives of rural flight within the gay community. Throughout the beginning of the twentieth century, the movement from rural spaces, like the town in which we first see Joe, to metropolitan cityscapes forms the backbone of the gay master narrative, as we saw in the previous chapter.<sup>48</sup> Joe’s participation in this narrative of movement and displacement places him in a very specific cultural moment for the gay community and further perpetuates the narrative of gay diasporic movement.

When Joe arrives in New York City he finds himself in a gay mecca. Schlesinger makes this clear for audiences by showing men hustling 42<sup>nd</sup> street in leather and cowboy gear. New York is markedly different from Joe’s Texas roots—no tumbleweed in sight, he is instead greeted by the underbelly of the city’s homosexual culture. The people he walks by are cold and unfriendly, he gets taken advantage of multiple times, and he manages to encounter multiple explicit moments of outright homosexuality. Walking through the streets of his new home away from home, Joe runs across men who look like

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<sup>47</sup> Floyd, “Closing the (Heterosexual) Frontier,” 111.

<sup>48</sup> See also Chauncey, *Gay New York*.

him, cowboys, who, like him, are in the business of selling their bodies for money—though unlike Joe they are not selling themselves to women.

Joe's cowboy aesthetic in a metropolitan epicenter like New York aligns itself with an exclusive appeal to gay men. This is made clear when Ratso Rizo (Dustin Hoffman) explains to Joe that "no rich lady with any class at all buys that cowboy crap anymore."<sup>49</sup> Joe came to the city because of the sexual prowess he had in Texas. As he explains throughout the film, his cowboy shtick got the attention of many women; however, the city has a way to disorient and homosexualize traditionally masculine aesthetics, like that of the cowboy, giving it the opposite affect that Joe intended. The city "turns" him from the bright and cheery boy from Texas to a homeless deviant who somehow still manages to retain his charm. Joe's descent into the underbelly of gay life in America places itself within a cultural fear of the power that the big city could hold over impressionable youth. Joe's deviance is apparent when he is in Texas; he recounts his sexual conquests throughout the film as well as through flashbacks, but that was in small town Texas where his sexuality was not contested. Because of his descent into the world of the hustler he has abandoned his heterosexual values and allowed the "bug" of the gay world to bite him.

This "bug" comes forward in his narrative when he allows homosexual sex acts to happen. Early on Joe gets the attention of a high school-aged boy who takes him to the back row of a movie theater for a blowjob. The steamy action starts as the boy nuzzles himself into the crook of Joe's neck. His eyes dart in front of him, his mouth contorts as the boy descends and presumably takes him in his mouth. Focus shifts from the action of

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<sup>49</sup> Schlesinger, *Midnight Cowboy*.



the two men to the movie playing where a rocket in space is shown ejecting itself in two, propelling a man backwards. He begins to replay moments of his life in Texas with women, and the screen constantly shifts focus from the flashbacks, the man floating in space, and Joe's face slowly turning from pain to pleasure. A lot happens in this scene, but most important is Joe's shifting attitude toward male sexual stimulation. The image of the astronaut lost in space signals his own lost identity, and the image of the rocket breaking in half separates his past from his present self. The split images of himself with women versus the scene at hand show the audience the split that occurs during his first sexual encounter with a man. Joe's transformative sexual experience in the movie theater is less of a bug and more an admittance of his own sexual identity that has been kept from himself throughout his life up to this point. Understanding Joe's sexuality less as something that is caught and more as a progressive shift goes against, in part, some of the societal associations with homosexuality as a disease. I interpret this moment within the film as a sexual awakening; however, for audiences this scene could signal how Joe caught the gay disease.

Joe's sexual identity and willingness to come to terms with his personal truth is so bound to his sexual trauma that it is never explicitly talked about within the film but is shown consistently through flashbacks. Julia Prewitt Brown explains that "as Joe's life in the city worsens, his nightmares of the past blend with the horrors of the present."<sup>50</sup> That horror is an image of him, naked, forcibly bent over the hood of a car by a group of men holding Billy Clubs and other phallic weapons. The sexual implication of this scene is all that audiences need to understand that an instance of sexual trauma has occurred in his

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<sup>50</sup> Julia Prewitt Brown, "John Schlesinger's *Bildungsfilm*: *Midnight Cowboy* and the Problem of Youth," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 59, no. 3 (Fall 2013), 654.

life. Joe's trauma is a necessary piece of his identity, and its appearance in moments of flashback during heightened tension signal the impossibility for him to distance himself from his past; "he cannot be separated from his historical moment."<sup>51</sup> Deployment of this kind of sexual trauma at times distances Joe from any possibility of his latent homosexual desire—in many ways an attempt to illustrate that *he cannot be gay because he was raped by men*. However, this narrative of sexual trauma at a young age echoes/resonates with the written narrative of the gay man found in life-writing discussed in the previous chapter. Sexual trauma and the realization of homosexuality often come together as a way to allow the narrator (Joe in this case) to come to terms with their own sexuality. Sexuality is an amalgamation of various pieces of a sexual identity and is a social praxis; for Joe, his sexuality is never explicitly stated—just that he wants to make money having sex with women—leaving the audience to question whether he is gay or not. Ultimately it does not matter whether audiences know if Joe is gay or not because his narrative is placed into the overarching narrative of 60s homosexuality for American audiences to see for the first time.

Whereas *Midnight Cowboy* excels in publicly showing the narrative of gay male culture in the 1960s, it reductively explores intimate connection between two men. As Joan Mellen explains in *Big Bad Wolves: Masculinity in American Films*, in many ways Schlesinger's film "separate[s] sensitive homosexual feeling from the stereotype and . . . expos[es] the repressed and latent homosexuality in male bravado."<sup>52</sup> The relationship between Joe and Ratso is queer, but it is hard to call it gay because of the lack of explicit

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 655.

<sup>52</sup> Joan Mellen, *Big Bad Wolves: Masculinity in American Films* (New York, NY: Pantheon, 1977), 289.

sexuality between the two men. The boys love each other, care for each other, provide for each other, are each other's other half in many ways. Yet as Michael Moon explains, the relationship has to be strictly platonic in order to keep it "'untainted' by sex or even signs of desire."<sup>53</sup> Their love for each other is also strictly monitored in that they are always at each other's throats: they can never be completely honest with each other and have to exude a particular masculinity to keep their feelings from entering the realm of homosexual desire. Their relationship is based on performative masculinity that distances the individual self from the other; they can never be fully intimate with their feelings for fear of being read as homosexual.

In many ways Schlesinger is creating multiple assumptions about love and sex throughout this film. On the surface Joe is able to participate in gay sex acts without getting labeled as gay because it is both his profession and sex is simply just sex—gay sex has no real connotation of feelings of intimacy within the film. Love is the thing that can turn a man gay, though, as evidenced through the inability for Ratso and Joe to commit fully to each other. Their love for each other, if unfettered by their individual masculinity, would edge too closely into actual homosexual territory and therefore spoil the film. Even at the moment when they are finally able to move from the world that is killing Ratso—his health is constantly in jeopardy because of their abject poverty in New York City—he dies on the bus ride to Florida. In the final scene, Joe holds the body of his partner, the first time they are able to exchange this form of intimacy; however, they are only able to do this because Ratso is dead. The film's killing of Ratso follows an age-old narrative where queer people must die because queerness is never allowed to prevail.

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<sup>53</sup> Michael Moon, "Outlaw Sex and the Search for America: Representing Male Prostitution and Perverse Desire in Sixties Film (*My Hustler* and *Midnight Cowboy*)," *Quarterly Review of Film* 15, no. 1 (1993), 34.

This final scene alerts audiences to the deep love the two men had for each other but also to the policing of homosexual love. Joe cradles his friend in this final moment, realizing that if he had been honest about his love for Ratso this might not have happened. In the end, *Midnight Cowboy* becomes a film about the anguish two men face in order to admit their affection for each other, ending with the death of one and the permanent mourning of the other.<sup>54</sup>

So much of Schlesinger's film is wound up in the gay narrative of self-acceptance and presses upon a narrative that is still commonplace today. Joe goes through the ringer in the film and gains semblances of that acceptance of the self that gay men go through—evidenced through the written gay master narrative. In the end, however, Joe goes through a purification process on the bus ride to Florida. Not only does his companion and partner die in his arms, he also trashes the sexualized cowboy attire for everyday clothes in order to fit in with the Floridian people: "Joe looks like everyone else."<sup>55</sup> Symbolically this abandonment of the "deviant" lifestyle of gay men in New York City speaks to the future of gay men seen in Collard's notion of the post-gay, wherein gay men leave the deviancy for a chance at a "normal life."<sup>56</sup> The envisioned future of Joe and Ratso is one of two men living a happy life together among everyday people without cowboy boots—it speaks to the future that Collard believed gay men would achieve, a future without the need to be so obviously gay. However, symptomatic for the time, queerness and any possibility of a homosexual future are taken away from Joe, and his future in Florida is left unknown while he grieves his lost love.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>55</sup> Brown, "John Schlesinger's *Bildungsfilm*," 659.

<sup>56</sup> Collard, "Leaving the Gay Ghetto," 53.

### **Cruisin' for a Bruisin': Violence and Splintering Identity**

While filming in the streets of New York City, William Friedkin's *Cruising* gathered crowds of angry members of the LGBTQ community in protest of the film that was believed to have the potential to cause more harm than good for members of the community. Eleven years after Schlesinger's breakthrough film about the subcultural zone of the gay community, *Cruising* took audiences back to a part of the underworld of New York City found in leather bars, back alleys, and parks at night.<sup>57</sup> Friedkin's film chronicles a budding detective, Steve Burns (Al Pacino), as he goes undercover impersonating a gay man in order to catch a gay man who kills gay men. The protests occurred out of fear that the film would depict the gay community as a deviant group of individuals whose private lives had no need to be the focus of the public eye. Only a few years before the filming of *Cruising*, singer Anita Bryant became a conservative voice of discrimination for how the private lifestyle of gay people in America seeped into the public, luring children into the clutches of evil. Bryant was the figurehead of the Save Our Children coalition, organized in 1977, which attempted to fire gay male educators because they were teaching children to be homosexuals. Members of the LGBTQ community worried that the film could fuel the fire of conservative voices because of its depictions of an explicit, deviant, sexual lifestyle. Friedkin's construction of a very private side of gay male culture on such a public scale was terrifying and extremely problematic considering Friedkin's identity as a straight man. In similar ways to *Midnight Cowboy*, this film was meant to shock audiences and gain box office sales by showcasing

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<sup>57</sup> William Friedkin, *Cruising*, directed by William Friedkin (1979; Warner Bros., 1980), Film.

semi-pornographic representations of gay men—the allure of deviance. The film sits in a very strange space in terms of analysis of the gay master narrative because while it illustrates an aspect of the gay community that in many ways has been lost from contemporary society on a narrative level it created problematic images of the gay male experience in America.

Friedkin's film offers an ethnographic, voyeuristic glance into the gay underworld through the eyes of straight people. Guy Davidson explains that the film functions as an “outsider perspective” of an “insider perspective” of the gay world.<sup>58</sup> Detective Burns is the vessel for straight audiences to experience the world that is so distant and foreign to them. Burns, who is a “straight” man at the beginning of the film, takes on a new name, wardrobe, apartment, and affect, and he takes audiences into gay bars with sweaty, shirtless, leather clad men who illicit terror, fear, and a level of stimulation. His performance of this subculture allows for audiences to see what it would be like to be a gay man like the one that he becomes without ever actually becoming part of that specific part of the gay community. Burns' face and body become the focal point of most scenes, thereby implying that the film is truly ethnographic, as the audience is taken through the world with a helpful guide, at times becoming his eyes seeing the leather world.

The difficulty of a film like *Cruising* is how it treats the identification process of homosexuality because of its reliance on the notion of the “bug” and how gay men lure men to join their lifestyle. Before the opening credits, a disclaimer states, “This film is not intended as an indictment of the homosexual world. It is set in one small segment of

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<sup>58</sup> Guy Davidson, “Contagious Relations: Simulation, Paranoia, and the Postmodern Condition in William Friedkin's *Cruising* and Felice Picano's *The Lure*,” *GLQ* 11, no. 1 (2005), 23.

that world, which is not meant to be representative of the whole.”<sup>59</sup> While audiences are being told that this film should not be consumed as a representation of the *entire* gay community, it still manages to criticize the community as a whole through its portrayal of this subculture. Burns is forced into this particular world, but he slowly begins to grow in it. He starts to learn the names of bar patrons, and he becomes comfortable roaming the streets, allowing gay men to come on to him, take him home, or do it right there in public. Homosexuality thus becomes a “controlling force that wells up inexorably in the protagonist and takes him over.”<sup>60</sup> This is the all-too-familiar bug narrative—that homosexuality is a disease that once in the vessel will spread to whomever it comes in contact with, reminiscent of the cultural reading of Joe Buck catching the bug in Schlesinger’s *Midnight Cowboy*. By the end of *Cruising*, after Burns is able to go back to his heterosexual lifestyle with his girlfriend, he is shown shaving in the mirror while his girlfriend tries on his leather gear in the next room, and we are left to wonder whether he will ever be able to go back to life as he knew it before or whether the “infection” is here to stay.

The “bug/infection” narrative is extremely dangerous for homosexual people—particularly considering that this film was released in 1980 on the eve of the AIDS crisis. *Cruising* and the bug/infection narrative further perpetuates a stereotypical narrative that was used as a way to further disenfranchise the LGBTQ community. It has to be questioned why a film like this was made during a cultural moment where the community was fighting for the advancement of rights for queer folk. Because the film is

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<sup>59</sup> Friedkin, *Cruising*.

<sup>60</sup> Davidson, “Contagious Relations,” 28.

ethnographic in nature, it is enticing for audiences to see a world that is beyond themselves. Friedkin's position as a straight man constructing this narrative signals to a moment where the production of gay storylines, especially a narrative that is as graphic as *Cruising*, could be seen as profitable—considering how Schlesinger's film won two major Academy Awards for portraying untouched material. The violence towards gay men *Cruising* was necessary for a film like it to be produced because it plays into the hatred of homosexuality that was so present during the 70s and early 80s. Showing a gay man getting offed was a policing of sexuality, specifically the deviant sexual promiscuity found in the leather subculture; however, Burns cannot die in the end because he was just “playing” the identity of a gay man. Burns' movement back to his life with his girlfriend is an attempt to signal a possible “cure” of his homosexuality even if we are left wondering whether he has truly left his life as a gay man behind.

Another problem with *Cruising* relates to how it links violence and homosexuality. Stuart Richards (Richard Cox) is a killer who picks up gay men in the leather scene and entices them before stabbing them until all that is left is their lifeless body. The sequencing of sex before murder showcases how “homosexual desire may turn into murderous violence.”<sup>61</sup> Richards himself is going through his own complicated narrative of self-acceptance as he is shown as someone who publicly lives a straight life—his apartment is filled with religious artifacts, and his letters from his father illustrate his own struggle with coming to terms with his sexuality. The murder he commits is seen as an attempt to purify himself of his “sin.” By killing the object of his “deviant” desire, he can somehow remove the sin of his homosexuality. This purification

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 32.



process insinuates the notion that homosexuality is sinful in some way and needs to be gotten rid of, like a disease. In this particular narrative, the individual who would “infect” is killed in an attempt to stop the spread of the “disease.”

Moreover, the film locates the violence it depicts exclusively as part of the leather subculture, which is thereby further identified as the truly problematic space of the gay community. Burns’ new gay neighbor, Ted Bailey (Don Scardino), often distances himself from the deviant lifestyle of leather men by telling Burns that it is not his scene because of the potential for violence that is found in that part of the community.<sup>62</sup> Alexander Wilson explains, “the leather scene, unlike that of the ‘good’ or ‘normal’ gay man, is the dark locus of evil, of desire.”<sup>63</sup> The leather scene is where the murders take place. Beyond the murders that take place in the community, the leather scene itself is portrayed in very violent ways, as a way to shock audiences and further disenfranchise this subculture in the gay community. When Burns ventures into the leather bars, he often sees scenes of men getting whipped, fisted, and beaten by partners in public spaces. Sex becomes explicitly linked to violent acts through Friedkin’s portrayal of the leather community.

While sex and violence are inextricably linked within the film, Friedkin does not show the actual act of sex taking place, presumably in order not to run afoul of censorship laws; however, instead of showing the act of sex, he shows the brutalized murder of various gay men. In the opening scene, Richards goes home with a man. At the point just before insertion, all we see is the man belly down on a bed from the mid-back

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<sup>62</sup> Friedkin, *Cruising*.

<sup>63</sup> Alexander Wilson, “Friedkin’s *Cruising*, Ghetto Politics, and Gay Sexuality,” *Social Text*, no. 4 (Autumn, 1981), 100.

up, and then the knife appears plunging into the man. Two things are noteworthy. The first pertains to the sexual imagery of the knife digging into the body of the man, a symbolic moment of penetration; the second relates to the fact that the sex act is shown only through the inevitable violence of the scene. The sexuality is removed and instead replaced with the violence, implicating how homosexuality can be seen as violent. The film is deliberate in its removal of sexuality.<sup>64</sup> We never see Burns in the act of sex with the men with whom he goes into the night—we are just left to assume that the action is sexual. The omission of sex for Burns' character is its own act of violence by limiting the space for homosexuality to appear on screen. We are able to see whipping, fisting, and beatings happening inside the club as background to Burns' movement through the underground, but the main characters' sexuality is missing or replaced with brutal violence. Removal of sexuality and the linking of anal penetration with murder play into cultural assumptions of the time that homosexuality was a violent force from which the youth must be kept away. Whether Friedkin's choice for this linkage was deliberate or not, the inevitable damage it had for the LGBTQ community should not be discredited. For years members of the community had been trying to separate this culturally assumed narrative of homosexuality and violence as the same, and this film puts the two back together.

Friedkin's film was part of and marked a cultural moment in many ways. Beyond the controversy and protests that surrounded the film, *Cruising* also illuminated a shift within the gay community in relation to the publicized gay male. Following the film's release, six extras were interviewed extensively in a cover story for *Mandate*—a

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<sup>64</sup> Davidson, "Contagious Relations," 31.

pornographic magazine—explaining their perspective on the protests and the film in general. It was polarizing for the men interviewed, as well as the community at large; some believed that it was effective in its treatment of the leather subculture, while others thought it did more harm than good. In these interviews, one of the most shocking answers illuminated the splintering of identity and communal experience within the gay community:

The whole gay movement is about freedom of expression. Isn't the image of gays this movie depicts better than suggesting that all homosexuals are nelly faggots? All gay people are *not* the same. It's important that people *see* this segment of gay life. We're everywhere. There's one in every family.<sup>65</sup>

It is difficult to parse this response to the production of *Cruising* because while it illuminates a narrative that goes against a very stable identity that America would eventually accept as the gay master narrative—in this way a very queer life—it manages to create dissidence within a community that was already marginalized at the time. Eventually this splintering and fragmentation of the gay community through linguistic violence from members of the community would lead to where the community is today: more divided than united.

The men of *Cruising* are the gay men that we see today, in terms of the raw body politic of the gay man. Extras in the film were masculine, butch, muscular, and predominantly white; they had facial hair, body hair, and confidence that resembled any number of frat boys on a college campus today. These types of gay men were not in

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<sup>65</sup> John Devere, "The Men of 'Cruising,'" *Mandate* (February 1980), 12.

trouble in the public ways that effeminate “nellie faggots” were during this period in American history. While a narrative of all types of gay men is important for the advancement of queer rights, the rhetorical anger of explaining that it is *better* to suggest we are not all fairies in the streets of New York City is extremely problematic. This language illustrates the beginning of the divide within the gay community that we continue to see today where certain gay men are public, and others are not. The divide of the public and the private gay narrows in on Collard’s post-gay as the gay men who, like the extras, were passably straight—making them the gays that get to be public. *Cruising* aided the construction of the gay master narrative in its ability to stimulate this division in a community that, during this period more than ever, needed to be focused on solidarity rather than divisive language.

### **The “Gay” Cowboys and Homo-Homosexuality**

As the 78<sup>th</sup> annual Academy Awards wrapped up, audiences across the nation were dumbfounded to see Ang Lee’s *Brokeback Mountain* lose the Best Picture race to Paul Haggis’ lesser known film *Crash* (2004). *Brokeback Mountain* was sweeping the awards circuit garnering the BAFTA and Golden Globe for Best Picture, so audiences were rightfully shocked when the Academy did not gift the film with that same seal of approval. Lee’s film about two ill-fated lovers of the American frontier in the 60s was a box-office success, illustrating how powerful a love story of this magnitude was for both American and International audiences.<sup>66</sup> *Brokeback* was the first major attempt by

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<sup>66</sup> See Leigh Boucher and Sarah Pinto, “‘I Ain’t Queer’: Love, Masculinity and History in *Brokeback Mountain*,” *The Journal of Men’s Studies* 15, no. 3 (Fall 2007). Boucher and Pinto explore the deep cultural similarities found within Lee’s characters and many men in Australia. *Brokeback Mountain* paralleled the narrative of so many men in the Outback and was a huge success because of this.

Hollywood to portray an explicitly gay relationship on screen. While the film's success echoes that of Schlesinger's *Midnight Cowboy*, Lee's film was outright gay, whereas the homosexuality was tailored and coded in *Cowboy*. Scholars and critics commended the film for its portrayal of the forgotten lives of many men in America, men who did not have the freedom of metropolitan cities to live a more out life. Queer scholar Thomas Piontek goes so far as to say that *Brokeback* was a "radical breakthrough in the representation of homosexuality on screen and commend[able of] Hollywood for its boldness in 'humanizing' love between two men in a mainstream film for the very first time."<sup>67</sup> Commending Hollywood for humanizing the gay man in many ways illustrates how Hollywood constructed the gay man in the image that made him human, that before *Brokeback* the gay man was somehow inhuman, and that this new kind of gay man was the kind of "good" gay man that heteronormative society could accept if not embrace.

However, in my estimation, Lee's film, like the others so far discussed, does more harm than good in its representation of homosexuality on screen. An international success, the film is a pervasive piece of media that has been consumed by everyone and their mother.<sup>68</sup> Yet, like Friedkin's *Cruising*, *Brokeback Mountain* is a gross co-opting of a homosexual narrative by a heterosexual director for profit—only at the time of its production homosexuality was less taboo than it was in 1980. Ara Osterweil chronicles how the narrative of homosexuality on film has too often been that of "co-optation" and argues that, instead of being radical, films like *Brokeback* are more conservative in their

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<sup>67</sup> Thomas Piontek, "Tears for Queers: Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain*, Hollywood, and American Attitudes toward Homosexuality," *The Journal of American Culture* 35, no. 2 (2012), 123.

<sup>68</sup> The first time I watched the film was literally with my mother from the comfort of our couch when it was released on DVD.

treatment of the subject matter.<sup>69</sup> What we are left with becomes a heterosexual explanation of homosexuality for non-queer audiences to believe and for queer audiences to both romanticize and puzzle over. For Piontek to explain that Hollywood “humanized” gay men in its production of *Brokeback Mountain* implies that before the film gay men were not human; however, the problem with the normalization of homosexuality through Lee’s film is not that it humanizes gay men but, rather, that it promotes a very specific kind of gay man and a very specific kind of humanity. The kind of gay man that became human was a masculine idealized version of a gay man, one that passes in the streets but is gay in the sheets.

Lee’s film does very little to create a productive gay narrative in *Brokeback Mountain*; instead, he gives audiences a conservative exploration into 60s era masculinity through the two main cowboys. American frontier narratives often play into notions of historic masculinity in the U.S.—as shown in how this particular narrative was flipped in Schlesinger’s *Midnight Cowboy*. By setting *Brokeback Mountain* in Wyoming/Texas, Lee is placing the film in a geographic location that is found in traditional American westerns. The western-ness of Lee’s film comes through its location, as well as its shaping of traditional masculinity. Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal) and Ennis Del Mar (Heath Ledger) are shepherding a flock of sheep on Brokeback Mountain, a mythical landscape in the Rocky Mountains.<sup>70</sup> Their job is morally pure—the sheep as a symbol of innocence; they are the protectors of the sheep, a masculine shielding from the dangers that lurk in the night.<sup>71</sup> In the beginning, they are warned of how leaving the flock

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<sup>69</sup> Ara Osterweil, “Ang Lee’s Lonesome Cowboys,” *Film Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (Spring 2007), 41.

<sup>70</sup> Ang Lee, *Brokeback Mountain*, directed by Ang Lee (2005; United States: Focus Features, 2006), Film.

<sup>71</sup> James R. Keller and Anne Goodwyn Jones, “Brokeback Mountain: Masculinity and Manhood,” *Studies in Popular Culture* 30, no. 2 (Spring 2008), 27.

unattended would lead to the death of some sheep. So in their first night together, the two men break the masculine narrative by sleeping with each other instead of watching their flock and then are punished in the morning by finding a lamb disemboweled. A lapse in their masculine identity leads to the loss of innocence, both by diverting from traditional notions of masculine sexuality and through the death of the object of their protection, the sheep. From that moment forward, their sexual/romantic relationship is always negotiated around their masculine duty/identity.

Years after the two men have their first frontier romance, a possibility for a queer life presents itself but is cut short because of man's duty. Ennis and wife Alma (Michelle Williams) divorce after having two kids and realizing things are not going to work out—Ennis's lack of consistent pay is the breaking point of their relationship, another failing of his masculinity in his inability to support a family. Jack, hearing of the news, drives up to see Ennis, seeing the divorce as the opportunity to live their lives together for the first time; however, upon his arrival he meets Ennis's two kids and is told that their lives cannot be like that. Ennis's moral duty to provide and take care of his kids places him within a masculine paradigm similarly to that of the sheep. He has to adhere to masculine ideals before he can live a gay life with Jack, and it is implied that it will always be like that—that the two men will never be able to live their lives together. The possibility of a queer future between the two characters could only potentially happen once Ennis's two kids are grown up, but that future is cut short when Ennis learns of Jack's death later in the film.

Lee has given audiences a tragic love story wherein the queer gets it in the end. Jack, throughout the film, is portrayed as the gayer of the two men; he is the one that

initiates their first sexual encounter, gives comfort, and drives to see Ennis, all things illustrating a stronger desire for Ennis than Ennis shows for him. In the end this queerness has to be policed through Jack's death. Ennis is told that Jack died unexpectedly while changing a tire, but in his mind he plays out the scenario that Jack was murdered by a group of men—echoing the story of a gay man being brutally murdered during Ennis's childhood. The possibility of openness is shown to be the major impetus for the two's relationship due to the fear Ennis has because of the murder of a gay man in his town as a child. It is suggested that Ennis is the reason for Jack's death, or rather that he was unable to protect his love.<sup>72</sup> He was so caught up performing masculine bravado in traditionally masculine ways that he forgot to protect the one person whom he was supposed to. Viewers are meant to recognize this as the tragedy of the time—that in the mid to late twentieth century homosexuality was something that had real social consequences; while the film accomplished this, its perpetuation of this form of tragedy only further purports the impossibility of queer love in American history. Suggesting that gay men were incapable of participating in romantic love at all—while not untrue—places the story within a very specific set of the gay master narrative. In the very final scene of the film, we are left to believe that Ennis will forever be grieving the loss of his lover as he adjusts the pieces of his shrine honoring his life with Jack. And yet this is somehow all that gay men are ever able to get in so many narrative exploitations of homosexuality: tragedy. Lee's film showcases how gay love and a future where gay men can be together is impossible because queerness and queer images are still being negotiated within prescriptive narratives of homosexuality.

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<sup>72</sup> Piontek, "Tears for Queers," 129.



*Brokeback Mountain* confronts viewers with a very explicit representation of the notion of the post-gay phenomenon. Collard's post-gay spreads throughout cinema when director's put normative narratives of gay men on screen. James Keller and Anne Goodwyn Jones argue that Lee's film attempted to "advance a 'gay' rather than a 'queer' sensibility,"<sup>73</sup> which by and large echoes the realities towards which Collard saw us heading—an America where queerness and destabilized identity were gone. Ennis and Jack embody the most masculine archetype of the American frontier—clad in cowboy attire, Ennis is reserved and quiet, while Jack is aggressive. The two participate in very hegemonic structures of masculinity because of their inability to be publicly out with their love for each other; they "refuse to allow sexual object choice to define or even affect their normatively gendered self-image."<sup>74</sup> The apex of their identity is hypermasculinized, a performative practice of self where they cannot actually be *gay* but rather are enmeshed together because of their masculine prowess and similarity. When Jack explains, "I can't quit you,"<sup>75</sup> he is speaking of both his affection and, more importantly, the ideal that is Ennis's hypermasculinity, which is a draw to aid in Jack's own failing masculinity. Like a math equation, Jack lacks in masculinity the things that Ennis has—emotional detachment, silence. These qualities are desirable to complete him, make him a whole man. Both men are shown to need each other to complete their own failings in order to make the ideal form of masculinity. Jack's claim that "I can't quit you" also complicates the possibility for true homosexuality because "quitting" implies a level of choice—reminiscent of the language of the homosexual bug discussed in

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<sup>73</sup> Keller and Jones, "Brokeback Mountain," 23.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>75</sup> Lee, *Brokeback Mountain*.

Friedkin's *Cruising*. Jack and Ennis are not hiding anything behind their masculinity, as they in no way participate in an alternative lifestyle on a public level: they are normal guys. Their identity is constructed in such a way that makes homosexuality a normalizing force, that we—gay men—as people are not the fairy queens or deviant leather gays that had dominated the narrative for so long; rather, we are normal in the ways that Jack and Ennis are normal.

The film also further perpetuates Collard's notion of the post-gay by participating in a culturally significant desire of sameness in the gay community. Jack and Ennis are the same in many ways on a physical, public level—their lives parallel standard American life in the 60s and 70s. Both cowboys leave the mountain and get hitched before starting a family. Their physical bodies are treated in the same ways too. When they are young they are chiseled and firm, and as they grow older they start to soften in the same places. They grow facial hair as a way of participating in the aging process. While their personalities do differ in some ways, on an external level the two men are the same person. Collard's post-gay marks/names/is a symptom of a period where gay men should not rock the boat—we have it good, so we should keep things status quo. This translates to a notion of homo-homosexuality, a sexual/romantic desire of similitude. Gay men are portrayed in contemporary society through a linkage of similarity: desire works by showing men that look the same and occupy the same position together. Seeing two very different men together in love disrupts culturally secure narratives of how bodies and pairings work. Friedkin's *Cruising* also participates in perpetuating the homo-homosexual narrative as all the men look the same in the film—Pacino's character is literally chosen for the job because he looks like the other victims. Lee's two cowboys

function in this contemporary conundrum wherein love can only be shown through the lives of men that look and act the same. This is evidenced by the fact that neither man maintains another homosexual relationship in the same capacity as they have for each other. It is both shown and implied that Jack has had homosexual tendencies in the past, but no man is as present in his life as Ennis because of the sameness in their characters, as well as the compatibility of their masculinity becoming the ultimate draw to complete this particular kind of sexuality.

Films like *Brokeback* are paramount in producing this cultural narrative of sameness. The more we see of similar looking gay men being together the more we as gay men are told what is and is not okay in the community. In this context it is necessary to address the fact that men of color are completely absent in these three films. The apparent lack of gay men of color in these films erases that identity from the master narrative of homosexuality in the U.S. throughout the historical record. A Latino man is made visible in Lee's film but only as a male prostitute that Jack buys when he is unable to be with Ennis—drawing on the contemporary association of gay men of color with sex workers. Jack's purchasing of this man fits within the reality of sex tourism that runs rampant today.<sup>76</sup> This man has no other function beyond sex within the film, he is simply exoticized and functions as an object instead of a subject. It was not until Barry Jenkin's *Moonlight* (2016) that a narrative of exclusively black queer voices became available to the masses. Hollywood's production of narratives that participate in these cultural representations of desire of similitude does not allow for voices and images of disenfranchised gay men to be seen or heard, thus furthering their distance from not only

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<sup>76</sup> Cristóbal Mendoza, "Places, Spaces, and Bodies: Male-to-Male Sex Tourism in Puerto Vallarta (Mexico)," *Athens Journal of Tourism* 1, no. 3 (2014).

the gay community but also the larger social milieu of American culture. Because of Hollywood's pervasive and powerful control of our media consumption we continually see these bodies, these types of gay men, leaving us with a feeling that this is how it is, that this is the story of the gay man.

### ***Love, Simon: Young Gays Raised by James Collard***

Coming-out narratives have been shown to be an important piece within the gay master narrative. In the first chapter of this thesis, I used Cohler's work to show the importance of the coming-out stage found within gay life-writing.<sup>77</sup> Often the narrative of coming-out has been shown to be one of immense difficulty, leading individuals into traumatic situations. Because of homosexuality's complex position within American society, the narrative of coming out is one that gay people understand all too well: we know that eventually we will have to come out in order to negotiate our space within a heteronormative world. Greg Berlanti's film *Love, Simon* places itself within this particular vein of the gay master narrative, showing audiences what it is like to come out in the twenty-first century as a high school senior. The film garnered a lot of success, with critics claiming that its "sheer warmth, openness, likability and idealism" won them over.<sup>78</sup> In part the film is a look into not only the life of a budding gay youth but also how parents can, and should, react to their children's coming out. While *Love, Simon* is warm

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<sup>77</sup> Cohler, *Writing Desire*.

<sup>78</sup> Peter Bradshaw, "Love, Simon Review – Heartwarming Gay Romance," *The Guardian*, April 5, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/apr/05/love-simon-review-nick-robinson-gay-romance>. See also Sheila O'Malley, "Love, Simon," *Roger Ebert*, March 16, 2018, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/love-simon-2018>, Glenn Kenny, "Review: In 'Love, Simon' a Glossy Teen Romance, the Hero Has a Secret," *The New York Times*, March 15, 2018, [https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/15/movies/love-simon-review.html?referrer=google\\_kp](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/15/movies/love-simon-review.html?referrer=google_kp).

and likable the film also positions itself within a very real post-gay sensibility. Simon Spier (Nick Robinson) is raised in the world that Collard wanted, one where homosexuality is normalized to the point that queerness is removed from the narrative. Berlanti's film does very little good to advance a queer movement within the gay community and in fact illustrates how the post-gay world is far too ingrained within the gay community's youth culture. The film's blockbuster success and positive reviews further perpetuate the uncomfortable truth of what it means to be gay in America today because of how it has been positioned as a success. Aimed at youth, *Love, Simon* becomes a narrative with which these viewers are supposed to align themselves; however, as has been expressed so far throughout this chapter, the encompassing effect of the master narrative generates who is and is not allowed to be gay based on the representative imagery of homosexuality in American cinema as dictated by Hollywood.

Beginning with our young star's narration, audiences learn that Simon is just like anyone else, a normal kid with loving, successful parents, a sister who likes to cook, a dog, and a good group of friends. Everything seems good—except for his “huge ass secret.”<sup>79</sup> A main piece of Collard's post-gay identity is the normalization of homosexuality to a point where we are just like everyone else. Simon becomes the post-gay ideal because on the surface level he is just like all of us, as he says, and therefore his sexuality is not at the forefront of his personal identity. So much of the progress within the gay community is tied to the notion of fitting in normalized American society in the hopes of obtaining basic human rights. Processes of normalization unfortunately take

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<sup>79</sup> Greg Berlanti, *Love, Simon*, directed by Greg Berlanti (2018; United States: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2018), Film.

away queer potentiality, promoting a sense of a heteronormative identity within the gay community—the piece of the post-gay that Collard idealized.

Simon is normal in that he does not disrupt the social order of his high school throughout the film. In comparison with Ethan (Clark Moore), the only other gay student in the school, Simon is never teased or mocked, unlike Ethan who is constantly harassed by two aggressive boys throughout the film. Ethan is both black and effeminate, two identity categories that are devalued in American society. Simon, unlike Ethan, is rather masculine, surrounded by girls and guys, affluent, and white. His struggle with identity comes from his fear of the treatment that Ethan receives throughout the film, which implies the negative attitude towards homosexuals who are out. However, when he finally is outed in the film and begins to get the same kind of harassment during a scene in the cafeteria, the incident is immediately cut short by the black queer Ms. Albright (Natasha Rothwell). Ms. Albright's position as a black queer woman places her at a position of far less power than Simon, who is both white and male, so for her to save Simon in the film places her within a cultural narrative where marginalized identities are only used as tools to advance the lives of those above them.<sup>80</sup> The work that Ms. Albright does in this scene illustrates how white gay men, specifically, access help from individuals within the LGBTQ community who occupy various positions of marginalization. Ms. Albright's protection is never offered to Ethan, who gets this kind of teasing ostensibly more often, and this is because his identity is not one that needs to be

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<sup>80</sup> Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, CA; Crossing Press, 1984). Lorde explains within this essay how women in the margins are expected to reach out and bridge the gap between members of the minority and majority.

protected within a post-gay society that preferences the lives of white gay men over everyone else's.

Simon's placation into post-gay normativity comes through as he attempts to persuade everyone of how normal he is, specifically, in his moments of self-disclosure with his friend, Abby (Alexandra Shipp), and his parents. After an evening at a diner with Abby, who disclosed much of her personal life to Simon, he decides to tell her that he is gay. Abby is the first person to know of his sexuality, but in the moment Simon continues to reassure her that nothing about him is different, that he is still the same person. The same conversation occurs with his parents on Christmas day, after he has been outed online to the whole school. During the scene Simon continues to say that he does not wish to be seen differently. Again, this is the problem with the notion of the post-gay because the narrative of homosexuality has been one of profound difference and hatred by members of the majority, so for Simon to want people to look at him as no different than what he was before is an attempt to normalize his identity. However, Simon's reassurance into a form of static identity turns his homosexuality into a force that *does/can* in fact alter an individual's identity. His distancing away from a possibility of identity change insists on the normative ideal of homosexuality, that sexuality does not define or change us.

Another problem with *Love, Simon* is its perpetuation of normative body standards. As Simon is trying to figure out who his secret pen-pal Blue is, he is offered a possible clue—that Blue is a fan of the show *Game of Thrones* and the hunk that is Jon Snow. Upon this discovery Simon tries to find all the boys in the school wearing t-shirts brandished with emblems from the show. Unfortunately, the boys wearing these shirts are

not the boys that Simon wishes his Internet romance to be. He looks at these boys, who occupy non-normative bodies (middle eastern, fat, lanky, too thin) with contempt and disinterest, and audiences are left to believe that if one of these boys were Blue then the romance would never work in the real world. Simon's sole interest in the body places itself alongside *Brokeback Mountain* and *Cruising* in that all three films work in ways to promote desire for similitude. In the end we find the identity of Blue to be a close friend, Bram (Keiynan Lonsdale), who in many ways looks like Simon, if not the kind of person that someone like Simon should be with. Bram is masculine, tall, toned, and affluent. The only difference is that Bram is biracial and Jewish. Bram's identity as a biracial and Jewish male does place him in a marginal position to Simon; however, Bram still occupies a space of normativity in his own masculinity and homosexuality. In comparison to Ethan—the other black queer student—Bram is “normal” like Simon, and that normalcy is what is desirable for Simon who does not want to be seen as different. The film could never have either Simon or Bram end up with Ethan because he is both too black and too gay. Bram and Simon have to be together at the end of the film because of their similitude. The relationship between the two boys exists within a post-gay structure because of the desirable sameness and societal stasis. Their relationship is a prime example of homo-homosexuality in that their desire and compatibility is allowed because they occupy similar spaces.

Since The Code's removal in 1968, the presence of queer cinema in American has grown exponentially, showcasing narratives of queerness that may otherwise have continued to go unheard and unseen. While the production of these films has been



notable for the representations of queerness to mass audiences, it is imperative that work be done to unpack what the films are ultimately doing in relation to the progression of LGBTQ rights and representations as the movement continues. The disheartening fact about queer cinema, and specifically films that represent gay male experience, is that the narrative that is being produced still promotes a culturally stable version of homosexuality. Films that gain access to the public continue a tradition of writing gay male experience that is acceptable to mass audiences and fit for consumption. In order to see queer experiences that construct narratives that are different from the gay master narrative, one usually has to search through underground films that often never get the public attention that they need and deserve. So much of the gay community is based around this dualistic public versus private life, and ultimately public life is determined by individuals who control the power within and outside of the community. This production of public gay male imagery, through cinema, only further defines what is and is not gay. Without allowing the narratives of members of the community who are further marginalized to come forward, those voices will continue to get lost. The loss of these more marginalized voices further perpetuates Collard's post-gay identity wherein the community continues to shrink, only allowing those who are normative to be part of the community.

## Post-Gay Identity in the Digital Age: Analyzing #instagay and the Production of Sameness

In the twenty years since James Collard's assertion of the post-gay identity in 1998, the space of the gay community has moved in many ways from tangible, physical spaces—bars, coffee shops, community centers—to a variety of digital ones. This is not to say that the physical spaces have disappeared but rather that these digital zones offer new possibilities for queerness in the new millennium. By digital spaces I refer to the areas of the Internet where social connection is made accessible to people across large distances of time and literal space. The Internet has been able to connect members of the LGBTQ community around the world in the twenty-first century through discussion boards, chat rooms, online dating services, and social networking/media apps in an attempt to connect a disparate group of people that for much of their history have been left at the margins of society without a sense of connection. As George Chauncey revealed in *Gay New York*, the physical space of gay life for the early part of the twentieth century was only viable in major metropolitan areas of the U.S. Today this is still the case in many ways; of course, states like Nebraska have metropolitan areas for gay culture, but Omaha and Lincoln are not Chicago, New York, or San Francisco. For individuals who find themselves in areas of the country where little to no gay culture exists, the Internet has become a prime space for locating community, understanding individual identity, and seeing a world beyond what is in front of them.

Gay men have moved online just like everyone else—currently there are an estimated 2.32 billion users on Facebook<sup>81</sup>—, yet the actual number of gay men online is

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<sup>81</sup> Statista, "Number of Monthly Active Facebook Users as of Fourth Quarter 2018," *Statista* (2019), <https://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/>.

still largely unknown. Digital spaces have been created with the intention of connecting this particular population. Apps like Grindr and Scruff were created as a way for men who are attracted to men to build platonic, romantic, and sexual connections. Gays online have also taken to sites/apps and carved out spaces for themselves to build a semblance of community, reframing the heteronormative usage of digital spaces to be inclusive of queer content.<sup>82</sup> Because so many of us exist online, our identity has become digitized.<sup>83</sup> More specifically, I want to argue that this digitization of our identity has caused it to become representative through a process of self-curation designed to better promote the most idealized version of ourselves. Our identity is bound to profiles—of what we do, what we post, who we follow, who follows us; and all of this is done through processes of self-selection. In our daily lives we might be accountants, bank tellers, educators, doctors, lawyers, etc.; however, online we can be anyone we want to be. Apps like Grindr are responsible for the production of this digital self as users are able to construct their profile in whatever fashion they desire. A single picture gives a visual representation of the identity of the profile, while stats can be given to alert others of height, weight, race, preferred sexual position, HIV status, relationship status, as well as the reason for which the user is on the app. A profile on Grindr becomes a representation of a person, giving an allusion of them, through very literal monikers of material physicality.

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<sup>82</sup> See Kevin Symes, “Gay Twitter Explained, Finally!,” *Instinct* (November 15, 2018), <http://instinctmagazine.com/post/gay-twitter-explained-finally>. Symes’ article is mostly just an attempt to unpack what “Gay Twitter” is through a polling of gays on twitter.

<sup>83</sup> See Claire Shumaker, et al., “Dressing for the Internet: A Study of Female Self-Preservation via Dress on Instagram,” *Fashion, Style, & Popular Culture* 4, no. 3 (2017) 365-382, and Eunji Lee, et al., “Pictures Speak Louder than Words: Motivations for Using Instagram,” *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 18, no. 9 (September 2015) 552-556.

Because more and more gay men enter these digital spaces, the narrative of gay male identity, which the previous chapters located via literary and cinematic sites, can now also fruitfully be examined online. In the first chapter of this thesis I outlined the problematic process of constructing a gay master narrative through the process of life-writing and the publication of particular narratives of gay identity. This narrative was found to be one that followed the trajectory of middle to upper-middle class white gay men throughout various decades of American history. The gay master narrative has become one that is universalizing, encompassing what it means to be gay in America. This problematic universalizing phenomenon became ever more evident in the second chapter through an understanding of how the film industry has perpetuated culturally understood narratives of what it means to be a gay man. The visual imagery of gay male experience, while it has become more publicized, still produces the image of gay men through a heterosexual male gaze. In both the first and second chapter, I showed how the gay master narrative is being dictated and controlled by larger structures of heteromascularity. Gay life-writing still has to be published in an industry that continues to be dominated by straight white men. Likewise, gay cinema has to be funded, produced, and distributed in an industry that remains dominated by straight white men. Gay men have never publicly been able to create their own identity—the identity of the gay man has always been dictated by the market and who controls it.

Digital spaces offer the possibility for truly queer narratives because the medium is not explicitly controlled by dominant heteromasculture. Apps like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Grindr, Scruff, etc. become the new space for the production of new gay narratives as users produce their own stories with which their followers can interact.

Our status updates, the photos we post, and the tweets we retweet have become a new kind of life-writing, a form of public journaling, public discourse, and a public posturing of the self for others to consume. The Internet offers its users the possibility for constructing their lives in ways in which they would like to be seen by others. However, the narratives only exist as an illusion of personal identity. Digital spaces on apps like Facebook and Twitter offer the potential for many new narratives to appear; however, the narrative that is found in these spaces carries familiar themes found in the gay master narrative.

Because the Internet is so expansive in scope, for the purposes of this chapter I will only be locating the movement of the gay master narrative on Instagram, an asymmetric, photo-sharing app with over one billion users.<sup>84</sup> The app allows individual users to post pictures of themselves, friends, animals, food, fashion, gadgets, activities, and motivational quotations; all of these types of posts show the intricacies of user's daily lives for others to see. Computer Science and Business scholar Yuheng Hu conducted the first comprehensive study of Instagram in 2014. He and his research assistants found that Instagram works within particular frameworks of types of users and types of posts.<sup>85</sup> Instagram works in such a way that resembles Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman's theorization of social constructionism, which holds that individuals within groups create social realities around them, while at the same time the social world is creating the individuals themselves as well as the particular identity groups.<sup>86</sup> Users on Instagram

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<sup>84</sup> Statista, "Number of Monthly Active Instagram Users From January 2013 to June 2018," *Statista* (2018), <https://www.statista.com/statistics/253577/number-of-monthly-active-instagram-users/>.

<sup>85</sup> Yuheng Hu, et al., "What We Instagram: A First Analysis of Instagram Photo Content and User Types" (presentation, 8<sup>th</sup> Annual ICWSM Conference, Ann Arbor, MI, June 2-4, 2014).

<sup>86</sup> Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Penguin Books, 1991).

generate photos and locate themselves within general types of users based on the eight types of photos that Hu found within his study.<sup>87</sup> Instagram has created a space where users inhabit equitable spaces of identity sameness beyond the general types of users Hu found. Individuals who share interests will often etch themselves into groups of similarity, following and interacting with those exhibiting similar social behaviors.

Gay men on Instagram occupy a very specific community space that has created its own language—the #instagay. *Vice* journalist Khalid El Khatib explores the discursive space of the instagay and how the phenomenon inundates gay male culture, whether you recognize the instagay or not: “Chances are, if you’re a gay man, you either follow or have encountered an instagay online.”<sup>88</sup> The instagay is marked by physical beauty, economic freedom, and a relentless behavior of posting that inundates a user’s feed with photos that entice jealousy, adoration, and idolization. In order to better understand him and what his identity construction means for the gay community at large, it is necessary to fully unpack how the instagay is a functional byproduct of years of a universalizing master narrative of homosexuality, a narrative that only makes room for individuals who exist within the frameworks that have been dictated by overarching heteromasculine structures. In the end, the instagay is little more than an updated version of the kinds of gay men found in life-writing and films that have already been analyzed in the preceding chapters. Only now in these narratives the gay man gets to produce himself through the personal and intimate nature of Instagram; however, it would be remiss to say that he is in full control of his narrative when the master narrative has inundated our understanding

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<sup>87</sup> Hu, “What we Instagram,” 598.

<sup>88</sup> Khalid El Khatib’s “Instagays, Unfiltered,” *Vice* (January 8, 2018), [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/59wye5/instagays-unfiltered](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/59wye5/instagays-unfiltered).

of what it means to be gay. The narrative of homosexuality has been ripped from our own hands and has become one that we no longer get to make for ourselves. In many ways this is the narrative that Collard wanted, namely an assimilationist future for gay men where we would all look the same and live the same life as anyone else.

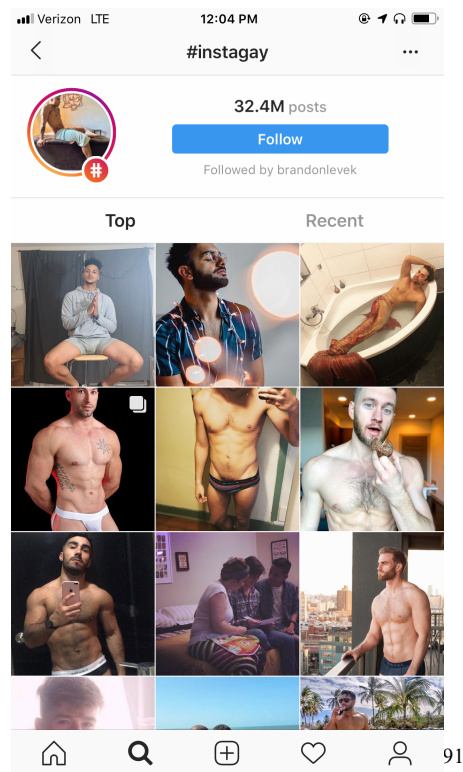
### **#instagay: a production of sameness and violence**

The instagay phenomenon began to spread across Instagram in 2013, three years after the app's launch in 2010. Individual users began to see spikes in follower counts reaching numbers well above 100,000. These early instagays curated content of themselves shirtless, traveling, and exploiting their financial freedom. As well, they were always solitary—isolating themselves as an identity that was singularly gay. Since the instagay began to gain attention from individual users, many popular press outlets began to explore what exactly was happening on Instagram.<sup>89</sup> Gay men were flocking to these men online, observing their individual behaviors and idealizing the lives of people they did not know. Since Instagram is a photo-sharing site, it manages to create the illusion that we do know the people in the photo because it offers a freeze frame of an authentic experience in which we, as an audience, are supposed to indulge. I look back to the work of André Bazin and the ontological space of the photographic image. Photographs occupy

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<sup>89</sup> See Khalid El Khatib's "Instagays, Unfiltered," *Vice*, January 8, 2018, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/59wye5/instagays-unfiltered](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/59wye5/instagays-unfiltered); Mike Albo's "Meet the #Instastuds: Hot Gay Men on Perma-Disply," *The Cut*, August 5, 2013, <https://www.thecut.com/2013/07/instastuds-hot-gay-men-on-perma-display.html>; and Rich Juzwiak's "The Ennui of the Instagay," *OUT*, May 17, 2018, <https://www.out.com/out-exclusives/2018/5/17/ennui-instagram>.

a difficult space because of their function in constructing a reality.<sup>90</sup> Perception of the photograph comes from the reality of the subject matter—a photo very literally takes a snapshot of a moment in time, as a result of which it is perceived as real. In terms of the instagay, the reality of the photo signals to the viewer the authenticity of the moment from which the photo came. As an audience we are expected to believe in the moment's authenticity; however, Bazin was discussing analog photography, whereas in the twenty-first century photography has become a digital process allowing for editing to enhance pieces of the instagay. In order to better understand the theoretical construction of the instagay it is necessary to first look at the phenomenon.



<sup>90</sup> Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," 6.

<sup>91</sup> This screen capture was taken on December 11, 2018.



I simply looked up the hashtag “instagay” on Instagram’s search function, and the above image appeared, bringing forth the image of the type of user that will be discussed in this chapter.<sup>92</sup> This is our instagay. With 32.4 million posts utilizing the hashtag, the instagay is a pervasive part of Instagram. The search function on Instagram solicits two ways to look at the results: top posts and most recent posts. Recent posts, as the name implies, become a real time chronicling of every post that uses #instagay on the app. The top post section, however, uses an algorithm to account for how much feedback—favoriting and commenting—a post gets within an hour. The more attention a post receives during that time the higher it appears on the top post section of the search result. This ultimately means that the individual user of Instagram determines what will be considered worthy of being found on top based on users’ personal feedback they give to other users. Top posts illustrate to users what is the best or most sought-after type of image/post, and the rhetorical value of the word top implies that photos that do not resemble the ones seen here are bottom, or lesser. The hegemonic structure of the search function of Instagram forces us as consumers of this content to know our place in it. In the case of gay men using #instagay, it becomes apparent what kind of gay man is worthy of being on top.

We would be remiss to divorce the conversation of the instagay from the machinic element of its development and deployment. With over 32 million posts as of December 11, 2018, this phenomenon is one that is constantly producing. When

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<sup>92</sup> It is important to note that the instagay does not have to use #instagay within their posts for them to participate in the cultural phenomenon. Instagays are both a spoken and a conceptual identity marker—an individual does not have to vocalize their participation within the identity for it to come through. Like many other identities within the gay community, our individual body announces our identity before we are able to vocalize it to others.

discussing production it is important to look at the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* for their conceptualization of desiring production wherein the human body itself is a machine that desires to produce.<sup>93</sup> Desiring production occurs with everything that we do—the theorists write that the machine eats and shits, functions we all participate in<sup>94</sup>—, and the production extends beyond the individual machine to encompass the things with which we interact. As human machines we produce on Instagram by creating content to publish—our production on Instagram is mediated through our hands. Instagram is the second machine: we desire to produce content for Instagram, and for the purposes of analyzing the instagay phenomenon there is a desire to produce instagay-worthy content. Producing this particular kind of content generates a positive affect for users because people want to see this kind of content, thus creating a loop where the individual produces what Instagram has already produced as being the top, most worthy type of post within the instagay phenomenon. Beyond the digital reality of the instagay online, his identity implicates our perception of homosexuality in the physical, “real” reality. The virtual desiring economy—normative standards of beauty that receive positive feedback online—leaks into the real world, determining what we are to perceive as beautiful.

The desiring-machine is in a state of excess: it desires to eat, upon completion has an excess, and thus desires to relieve itself by shitting. Desire is always producing. Countering Freud’s use of the unconscious as a theater, Deleuze and Guattari present the unconscious as a factory that enables “*production of productions*, of actions and of

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<sup>93</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (New York: The Viking Press, 1977): 1.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

passions; *productions of recording processes*, of distributions and of co-ordinates that serve as points of reference; *productions of consumptions*, of sensual pleasures, of anxieties, and of pain.”<sup>95</sup> The human body is constantly producing, and it is the production that we desire. The “we” is not a humanist we but rather a node in the process of production. It extends beyond the human node within a larger flow of desiring production. Instagram—as a machine—desires too, not because of a human will but because its algorithm has its own machinic desires, which differentially connect to human desires and in so doing construct normative desires among those human beings. Thinking along these lines, the Instagram user desires to produce the content that they deploy on their account, and using #instagay generates an outcome where the posting situates the product in a constructed identity category, allowing the human machine to produce and interact with other similar machines. The machines at play—Instagram, the content creator, and the audience—are always desiring to produce in tandem with each other, ultimately creating what is to be the most desirable form of production.

Instagram constructs the notion of how the desiring-machine should be producing by creating a hierarchy based on what is seen as “top” worthy, or superior, and ultimately desirable. Deleuze and Guattari do not believe that human desiring-machines are left to make decisions about how to exercise their powers of production; rather, they fit into larger societal desiring machines. Ultimately, the two claim, “*desire is part of the infrastructure*.”<sup>96</sup> In “Desire and Pleasure,” Deleuze explains, “an assemblage of desire indicates that desire is never a natural or spontaneous determination . . . desire is never a

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 104.

natural reality”<sup>97</sup>; if desire is not natural, then it is only found within social realities.

Berger and Luckman’s theory of socially constructed realities can be used to further this notion that desire is constructed because desire itself produces while at the same time it is being produced by the social world. To this end, desire has no end in sight;<sup>98</sup> it continues to circulate and flow, looking to produce and live its life as a machine among other machines. This flow is present through Instagram because the search function changes constantly, fitting the needs of what the user desires to see based on the feedback that the user is willing to give. While the individual search for #instagay may change from day to day, there will always be a “top posts” section to which the search draws users first, furthering the construction of what is seen as the ideal. Individuals can construct their own posts with the use of #instagay, furthering their own desiring production; however, Instagram as a social institution dictates what deserves to be promoted, producing its own version of what desire, and the identity of gay men, should be. Instagram’s machinic production of desire is also a capitalistic territorializing of desiring flows. The app is an expression of capitalism’s desire: a desire of flow—the movement of products for capital. Thus, identities and desires constructed/produced by Instagram have to be understood through the lens of capital(ism), which is the *ultimate* desiring machine.

Capital on Instagram both exists monetarily and through the feedback that is produced. In the case of the latter, feedback—again favoriting, following, and commenting on posts—is given in return for the goods and services that are provided for the individual user on Instagram. The idealized image of a gay man is the product, and

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<sup>97</sup> Gilles Deleuze, “Desire and Pleasure,” in *Two Regimes of Madness*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Ames Hodges and Mike Taormina (New York: Semiotext, 2007) 124-125.

<sup>98</sup> Kitty Millett, “A Thousand Queer Plateaus: Deleuze’s ‘Imperceptibility’ as a Liberated Mapping of Desire,” *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge* 11-12 (Spring 2006).

pressing the favorite button signals to that user that you are paying them for their service. The capital on Instagram is a virtual currency of popularity. That popularity brings you the monetary capital for which Instagram is a vehicle. Brands sponsor individuals with high follower counts in an attempt to sell products to a mass market. Users like Kendall Jenner can be paid by the skin care company Proactiv for posting one photo that talks about their product. That particular post is sitting at 2.4 million likes as of February 9, 2019. Kendall Jenner gains both feedback and monetary capital for the production that she has done on the app. Instagram is never removed from the machine of capitalism.

Beyond its machinic properties Instagram is an app that produces and promotes distinct bodies and pleasures that ultimately aid in the construction of social perceptions of desire within the gay community through the use of hashtags like *instagay*. Michel Foucault was vehemently against theorizing desire because of its rooting in psychoanalysis; in “Desire and Pleasure,” Deleuze makes note of a conversation he had with Foucault that illustrates his disagreement with the use of the term “desire.” Deleuze states,

Michel kindly and affectionately told me something like the following: I can’t stand the word desire; even if you use it differently, I can’t stop myself from thinking or experiencing the fact that desire = lack, or that desire is repressed . . . So what I call “pleasure” is maybe what you call “desire,” but in any case, I need a word other than desire.<sup>99</sup>

Foucault opted for the study of bodies and pleasures rather than desire, famously claiming, “The deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and

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<sup>99</sup> Deleuze, “Desire and Pleasure,” 130

pleasures.”<sup>100</sup> Similarly to Deleuze and Guattari, Foucault believed that there were boundless possibilities for bodies and pleasures to organize themselves;<sup>101</sup> however, “larger forms of social organization” dictate the way that bodies and pleasures are mobilized and organized.<sup>102</sup>

When we look at the men in the picture above, the body has become the central focus of every image. Instagays occupy the space of a normative standard of beauty, forming the larger social organization that dictates the particular bodies and pleasures that are to be viewed as desirable. The particular desirability of these bodies is made evident because of the algorithmic function of Instagram, as outlined above. Masculinity becomes the piece of the instagay that is to be both envied and desired. The allure of these men on Instagram stems from their deployment of overtly aestheticized masculine bodies. Shirtless men on Instagram conjure up images of the Calvin Klein underwear models of the 90s—displaying the ideal pieces of men in very eroticized positions. Susan Bordo explores how advertising in menswear shifted during this period to exploit a market that was selling sex as well as clothing.<sup>103</sup> Bare backs, bulging arms and chests, and an approachable distance—the men of the 90s and the gays of today display their whole self for the rest of us to soak up. The traits of both the underwear models and of the instagay place themselves in an historic space of masculinity that values pieces of men (muscles and reproductive organs). As an audience we participate in these images by being the gaze of desire, locating the image as something that we want to see—

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<sup>100</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, 157.

<sup>101</sup> Ladelle McWhorter, “Foucault’s Attack on Sex-Desire,” *Philosophy Today* 41, no. 1 (Mar. 1997): 164.

<sup>102</sup> Leo Bersani, “Foucault, Freud, Fantasy, and Power,” *GLQ* 2, no. 1 (1995): 13.

<sup>103</sup> Susan Bordo, “Beauty (Re)discovers the Male Body,” in *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and Private* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 174-175.

perpetuating an idealism of a particular social organization that values normative masculinity above all else. The instagay is just a carryover of the idealized masculine aesthetic that sprouted from the underwear ads in magazines.

Of the nine posts that are visible within the above image, only one features other people besides the individual instagay. To this end the body becomes the centralized focus of every image—every post very literally centers the instagay in the photo as a singular entity. All of the men in the photos exist in the physical space between thin and fit, muscles bulging in shirtless photos. Hair is a feature of most of the posts, with beards and body hair promoting a contemporary push for rugged masculinity.<sup>104</sup> From these particular images we can infer what types of bodies are being celebrated within the gay community, based upon their positioning at the top of the search for the instagay. Given the absence of any images of larger or fat men, effeminate, disabled, or other non-normative bodily-presented individuals it is clear that these particular bodies are seen as least desirable. The other noticeable piece missing from the image of the instagay is racial diversity. The instagay occupies a space of passable whiteness, further perpetuating the notion that whiteness is the standard of beauty in our world. Of course there is racial diversity within the realm of the instagay; however, the lack of diversity within the top posts section illustrates how individuals who occupy a markedly non-white body are devalued within the gay community.

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<sup>104</sup> Since 2014 there has been an inundation of the term “lumbersexual” to describe men who exhibit such rugged bravado that plays into masculine stereotypes of lumberjacks in the wilderness. See Denver Nicks, “Confessions of a Lumbersexual,” *TIME* (November 25, 2014), <http://time.com/3603216/confessions-of-a-lumbersexual/>, Holly Baxter, “Out of the Woods, Here he Comes: The Lumbersexual,” *The Guardian* (November 14, 2014), <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/nov/14/lumbersexual-beard-plaid-male-fashion>, and Willa Brown, “Lumbersexuals and Its Discontents,” *The Atlantic* (December 10, 2014), <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/12/lumbersexuality-and-its-discontents/383563/>.

As I noted earlier the instagay informs our reality outside of Instagram, and with a lack of bodily diversity on the site itself the community at large becomes one that marginalizes and further disenfranchises individuals that do not occupy the space of being an instagay. Eric Darnell Pritchard explores the inherent racism found on digital spaces towards members of the black community in his book *Fashioning Lives: Black Queers and the Politics of Literacy*. Pritchard articulates that members of the black queer community needed to carve out their own spaces of the web out of necessity—the black queer web became the only place where they “could manage their public lives.”<sup>105</sup> On other social networking services meant to connect gay men—Grindr, Scruff, etc.—the politics of the instagay produces a linguistic violence towards anyone who is not him. So often on these apps that are meant to be a space for connection do we find profiles that read, “no fats, femmes, or Asians,” and that kind of bodily violence becomes normal.<sup>106</sup> The space of both public and private gay male culture is one that has to be demarcated by a particular type of gay man. This has been made evident throughout this thesis from the types of narratives we have been willing to produce and promote throughout literature and film. This type of gay has become the only one that we are allowed to know exists, and anyone else that does not occupy his normative bodily narrative is left to survive to the best of their abilities. I guess it might be unfair to say that the instagay created this linguistic violence within the gay community when the way that we have portrayed gay men throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century has been doing the same thing

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<sup>105</sup> Eric Darnell Pritchard, “Feeling Myself: Refashioning Undesirability in Black Queer Digital Spaces,” in *Fashioning Lives: Black Queers and the Politics of Literacy* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, November 1, 2016), 194.

<sup>106</sup> Xiaofei Liu, “No Fats, Femmes, or Asians,” *Moral Philosophy and Politics* 2, no. 2 (January 2015).



without explicitly stating that the only gays that are worthy are the white, masculine, instagays of the world.

Ultimately the construction of the instagay online and the desirability of a certain type of gay man doubles back to the overarching narrative trajectory in which gay men have been participating for decades—leading our community to Collard’s post-gay identity. Leo Bersani explains that “it is not sex acts themselves that are the most troubling to non-gays but the gay lifestyle.”<sup>107</sup> What Bersani means is that the rest of the world has feared the “deviant” lifestyle of the gay community—the leather bars, the carnal intimacy, the gay community of William Friedkin’s *Cruising*—, which in turn has kept gay men on the fringes of society. To combat this cultural fear there has been a promotion of specific images of the gay lifestyle in an attempt to be seen as palatable to society at large—seen through my discussion of life-writing and film; in turn, these images have become the narratives that we are all supposed to attain. Within the instagay phenomenon, evidenced through the above image, no sexual deviance is shown. There is no use of leather, chains, group play, etc.; rather, we see men doing things that would generally speaking be okay to do within the public sphere where others can observe them.<sup>108</sup> Instagays also participate in dominant masculine culture, which dominant U.S. culture prefers. Because the instagay is neither deviant nor feminine he is able to be a public figurehead of the gay community. His lifestyle is normative in his public image—not only do the gays want you to be an instagay, but the wider culture does too. Instagram

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<sup>107</sup> Bersani, “Foucault, Freud, Fantasy, and Power,” 13.

<sup>108</sup> I use the term deviance because of how it has been used as a way of legislating what is acceptable sexual behavior throughout history. Part Two of Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* Volume I, “The Repressive Hypothesis,” goes into detail about how sexual deviance has been negotiated throughout history.

further the gay master narrative because of its replication of sameness through the top posts section of the app. Reproducing this particular sameness of identity pushes gay men further into the space of normativity.

### **#instagay and archival spaces for futurity**

Instagram and the instagay present themselves as a possible problem for the space of identity for the gay man. So far I have shown the problematic space of the instagay and the reproduction of sameness that occurs on Instagram, creating a commentary that seeks to look at how the instagay is just a perpetuation of the same normative narrative of gay male life. However, Instagram does offer, in many ways, a space for the curation of an archival record of queer knowledge. Archival knowledge is something that is being sought after within the realm of queer studies because of an inherent lack of it within historical, personal, and academic records. Charles Morris explains the necessity of a queer archive, arguing that “queer lives, past and present, are constituted by voices that swell with the complex measures of our joys and our struggles against annihilating silence.”<sup>109</sup> An archive of queer texts, media, news, images, etc. offers all of us the chance to understand something about ourselves that might seem like it is missing. How often do we, as queer youth, sit in history classes and gloss over anything that could be remotely queer? Where is Stonewall in American History books? The Sexual Revolution of the 1960s? The truth of the AIDS crisis in America and around the world? So much of being queer in our world today is a searching process to find information on the history of who we are as people—both past and present. In many ways the internet

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<sup>109</sup> Charles Morris, “Archival Queer,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 9, no. 1 (Spring 2006), 146.

provides the possible space for archival knowledge to both be found, generated, and sustained.

The reason I assert that Instagram can be that space of archival knowledge is because of the chronological generation of posts. Instagram is an app that becomes a photobook of memories, milestones, relationships, and just about anything else you would like that fits within its community guidelines.<sup>110</sup> What the user posts gets stored on your own profile, as a document of personal history. The use of hashtags, like *instagay*, produces a chronology and an archive of posts in which users participate. For *#instagay*, the number of posts sits at 34.4 million as of March 13, 2019, a growth of 2 million in just a couple of months.<sup>111</sup> Growth of that much in such a short period of time illustrates the relentless post behavior of gay men on Instagram, as well as how one billion users on the app can generate so much content. All those posts are collected within a database with the power to show gay men from around the world participating in archival work without their knowledge. Of course individuals on Instagram can delete and hide their posts from broader public discourse, but the fact remains that the app's ability to collect the posts, within a specific catalogue of identity, demonstrates a collective history.

Queer scholars Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes have explored the desire of creating a queer archive for scholars of LGBTQ history. For them, a genealogy “shows multiple, contradictory pasts that reveal the interplay of power and knowledge evident in given constructed concepts.”<sup>112</sup> Instagram is an example of a genealogical archive in the way that it literally serves as a space for collecting photographic memories.

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<sup>110</sup> Post whatever you want except acts of explicit violence or nudity.

<sup>111</sup> This number will only continue to grow as this thesis ages.

<sup>112</sup> Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes, “What’s Sexual about Rhetoric, What’s Rhetorical about Sex?,” in *Sexual Rhetorics: Methods, Identities, and Publics* (London, GB: Routledge, 2015), 2-3.

Users can catalogue themselves throughout their days, weeks, months, and years. The use of hashtags, like instagay, gathers images together within an archive of similarly identified content. Theoretically, if every gay man used the hashtag, a record of all posts from every gay man would be present for scholars to understand that interplay of power that Foucault explores in “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History.”<sup>113</sup> For Foucault the power of a genealogy does not lie in its ability to locate the problematic notion of the origin but rather in a chance to locate the pieces of a history unconcerned with singular narrative trajectories that begin and end at situated points in a chronological line. To that end, if every gay man on Instagram—and I mean *every* gay—were to utilize the hashtag instagay as a method for genealogical praxis then the line would be disrupted from its normative narrative history. It would show disparate lives, narratives that queer the master narrative of what it means to be gay in a Collardian post-gay America. This disruption in the narrative history echoes J. Jack Halberstam’s conceptualization of the archive found in *In a Queer Time and Place*:

The archive is not simply a repository; it is also a theory of cultural relevance, a construction of collective memory, and a complex record of queer activity. In order for the archive to function, it requires users, interpreters, and cultural historians to wade through the material and piece together the jigsaw puzzle of queer history in the making.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 139-164.

<sup>114</sup> J. Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York City, NY: New York University Press, 2005), 169-170.

While the search page of the instagay is not the ultimate archive of queer history, its existence is useful when piecing together the how and why of the post-gay and offers a space for distancing our community from that identity.

The problem with using Instagram as a possible space for a queer archive comes from the sheer volume of content, as well as the truth of the content that is being produced. With nearly 34 million posts and counting, it is nearly impossible to consider the amount of time and work it would take to efficiently catalogue each of those experiences into some semblance of informative knowledge. Work like Yuheng Hu's first comprehensive study of Instagram showcases the potential for the work that scholars of digital culture can do utilizing computers and computer programs to do a bulk of the work for us; however, this kind of technological analysis of a digital space furthers the depersonalized zone that Instagram is. Having a computer do the work for us makes the archive seem like it is no longer ours and instead is just a repository for information. However, it is important to go back to Deleuze and Guattari here to consider that the use of a computer for the purposes of archiving is a machinic function—it is less about the authenticity of the experience and more about the desired outcome of what that machine can do. In order for an archive to function there needs to be human interaction with it. This leads me to considering the final possible problem for the use of Instagram as archive: does what exists on Instagram even constitute the truth?

The notion of truth on Instagram is important to consider when unpacking the instagay as a public self. Social theorist Erving Goffman discusses the notion of face work within *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, specifically how the face, or appearance, is an integral piece in the facilitation and maintenance of human

communication.<sup>115</sup> In his metaphor of a stage performance, an actor performs the role at the level of the face and body; however, behind the curtain the body is not the performance. What this means is that when the actor leaves the stage the performance is completed and the face and the body revert to what they were before being placed on stage. Goffman theorized that face work happens in every social situation that we encounter on a daily basis—altering our public personas to match the room in which we find ourselves. The person we are depends on the room in which we are. This face work is exacerbated on the level of Instagram where the face and body are literally the only thing that an audience sees. It is persona work at its finest, as the individual user is able to control their look, their identity, their public behavior, and their likes/interests—all for public consumption of the self. Instagays are able to control who they want to be based on the space of their account. As a consumer of the instagay we only get the public persona that is curated for us on the level of the commodity—we never know who the instagay is, even if we think we do.

While it is important to consider Goffman's theory of face work in relation to the implications of Instagram and the instagay, it is also important to recognize the lack of the physical in this discussion. The loss of the physical reality of the face at the level of the digital implies a loss of the real. Without a tangible image of a person, how can there be any real face work going on? I instead opt for a theory of screen work—a screen-mediated self. The screen becomes the stage in Goffman's theory, a pixilated representation of a person where the public self is even more altered because of the loss of physical proximity. Truth of the person behind the screen continually removes itself

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<sup>115</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1959).

from the possibility of authenticity. How, then, do we separate this computer-mediated self from the face-to-face reality that has defined the history of the queer community for decades?

I do not have the answer to this question, and I am not sure if we are in a place yet where authenticity can fully be untangled from digital versions of the self. However, Instagram and other digital spaces like it do offer the potential for controlling archival knowledge. The goal of this queer archive would be to bring the community together with the promise of providing a queer history—to acknowledge the faults of the past to aid in a better future. To quote Foucault, “History is the concrete body of a development, with its moments of intensity, its lapses, its extended periods of feverish agitation, its fainting spells.”<sup>116</sup> For the purposes of this thesis this means that Instagram may not be the perfect space for archival knowledge, but it offers the possibility of an immersive queer history—a history that is constantly moving and shaping; a history that does not prefer particular histories over other ones; a history that is able to acknowledge its faults. It is what Muñoz would have wanted: a queer future of hope and progress, not the problematic post-gay world wherein we need not learn our interwoven and shapeless history. The narrative of the gay man is not complete; it has its own history, and it has a future that needs to be worked on.

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<sup>116</sup> Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 145.

### **Notes Towards Post-Gay Futurity**

In 1998 James Collard pined for a future where homosexuality would be seen as normal to the rest of America, where gay people could walk into a grocery store and buy their eggs, where gay people did not have to worry about their sexuality being the first signifier of their personhood. Two decades later, Collard's post-gay identity has become the only way to be publicly gay in America. In order to be recognized and acknowledged within and outside of our community you have to act and look a certain way—affluent, masculine, and white. This has been made evident by the kind of narratives that are being published and promoted that deal with gay men. If we as gay people only see the same representations of us in books or on tv and movie screens, then we can be excused for feeling that this is the only way to be a gay man. The implication of Collard's view is that if you do not adhere to the normative version of a post-gay gay man, then your place in the community is uncertain.

In this thesis I outlined the narrative trajectory of how the community came to exist in this era of the post-gay. I only discussed the movement of how the gay master narrative has been based on selective literary, filmic, and digital media sites. More work could easily be done on these specific sites, and one could expand upon what I have done here to locate the narrative as it appears in very tangible locations like gay clubs and pride events and investigate whom we see as being at the forefront of the gay community.

This analysis requires further research into the tension between those who represent the post-gay identity and those that do not. Currently this tension has manifested itself in a disparity between those who are still fighting for a queer future and those that accept their present. Muñoz's queer futurity presents an opportunity for gay



men to negotiate a future that does not settle in place, an ongoing pursuit of the horizon. He asks us not to rest merely because of a substantial distance traversed in the gay rights movement but instead to keep pushing for a future that is more inclusive and holds many queer potentials beyond marriage equality. Because of the representational power of post-gay identity the growth of those that do not fit this identity is stunted. There is need for further examination into how this disparity can be reconciled in a way that promotes a multiplicity of gay identities—not just a Collardian post-gay identity.

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